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## The Garden-Desert Continuum Competing Views Of The Great Plains In The Nineteenth Century

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# THE GARDEN-DESERT CONTINUUM

## COMPETING VIEWS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

### IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

JOHN L. ALLEN

*In the central portion of the great American continent there lies an arid and repulsive desert which, for many a long year, served as a barrier against the advance of civilization. From the Cordillera to Nebraska, and from the Yellowstone River in the north to the Colorado in the south, is a region of desolation and silence . . . enormous plains which, in winter, are white with snow and, in summer, are gray with the saline alkali dust. They all preserve the common characteristics of barrenness, inhospitality, and misery. . . . In this stretch of country there is no sign of life, nor of anything appertaining to life. There is no bird in the steel-blue heaven, no movement upon the dull gray earth—above all, there is absolute silence.*

*John L. Allen's major publications in historical geography and the environment include Passage through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest (1975). He is professor of geography at the University of Connecticut.*

*Listen as one may, there is no shadow of a sound in all that mighty wilderness; nothing but silence—complete and heart subduing silence.*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

With these words, a nineteenth-century British author—who might better have stuck with the Sherlock Holmes mystery stories that made him famous—illustrated a conception of the American Great Plains that was, according to the conventional historical interpretation of American images of the interior, the dominant view of that region during the first sixty years of the 1800s. American historians and geographers have argued that the myth of the Great American Desert dominated the pre-Civil War view of the Great Plains and that it proved itself to be very hard to eradicate from American maps and minds.<sup>1</sup> It was this conception of the plains as desert, according to the traditional interpretation, that caused the American folk migration westward to leap over the region during its drive to the Pacific in the 1840s and 1850s. Haunted by visions of broiling sands and blinding sun, Americans hastened across the plains between the Mis-

souri River and the Rocky Mountains to the more attractive regions of Oregon and California. The Great Plains were a barrier to be crossed with all possible speed during the migrations, and the settlement of the great western agricultural region was delayed several decades by the Desert image.

But this predominant view of the plains as Desert did not last forever—or so goes the conventional wisdom. During the years following the Civil War, the Desert image was replaced by a counter-myth, a rival fancy: a view of the plains as Garden of the World.

It is a museum of wonder and value. . . . Its surface was covered with fields of grain, whose market proceeds would more than pay for the land; and near the center was a spring and a grove which encircled a happy home filled with many tokens of prosperity and the merry music of children. Half concealed from view were barns, pens, coops, granary, shed for wagons, plows and machinery, all in good order, while farther away and central in a grass plat shaded by two friendly elms was a white school house. In the distance it looked like a pearl in an emerald setting.<sup>2</sup>

After the war, as Americans moved into the Great Plains, up the valleys of the Platte and Kansas and Missouri rivers, they began to rebel against the slanderous terminology of the Great American Desert proponents of the period before 1860. Followers of the traditional interpretation have eloquently recounted how the plains settlers replaced the myth of the Desert with the myth of the Garden.<sup>3</sup> From earliest colonial times, Europeans and Europeans-become-Americans had seen the land of the Atlantic seaboard settlements as a New World Garden, long kept virgin to redress the overcultivation of the Old World. It was easy to extend this myth beyond the Mississippi and to view the plains, like the seaboard of earlier times, as a land of promise, an Eden of vacant and fertile land held back by the Creator until it was needed by his chosen

people.

This conventional understanding of American attitudes toward the Great Plains in the nineteenth century is neither completely invalid nor necessarily incorrect; but it is too simplistic to be fully satisfying. The contention that the majority of Americans held to a Desert conception of the Great Plains before the Civil War and then to a Garden concept afterward stems from an epistemology based upon induction, where error results from the failure to follow proper inductive procedures and from overgeneralization based upon too few facts.<sup>4</sup> To claim the universal acceptance, at any given time, of stereotyped images of the Great Plains is to ignore—as the holders of those myths themselves ignored—the presence of a considerable array of data to the contrary. Proponents of the conventional interpretation have argued the existence of nearly universal myths of Garden and Desert on the basis of the geographical lore available to the literate American public during the pre- and post-Civil War periods. The failure of this argument lies in a basic misunderstanding of geographical images or in a misunderstanding of how geographical information or impressions are acquired, transmitted, modified, and retained within the minds of a people. An image cannot be defined only on the basis of the geographical information available. It is not enough, for example, to say that because travel accounts mentioned desert conditions and some geographies and school textbooks of the period between 1830 and 1860 printed "Great American Desert" in the blank spaces west of the Mississippi River that the majority of Americans during those years thought of the plains as a desert. Nor is it enough to say that because the Union Pacific, Kansas Pacific, and Northern Pacific railroads, along with the western land speculators and newspapers, flooded the country with literature describing the Great Plains as Garden of the World that the Garden view became dominant in the years following the Civil War.

The popular view of the environment or of regions cannot be treated this simplistically.

To begin, the Great Plains themselves do not constitute a unified or homogeneous region: in terms of geographic reality, some areas are more gardenlike while others are more desertlike. But more important is what the mind does to that geographic reality. The mind is like a mirror that reflects what it perceives; the nature and appearance of the reflected image is determined by the conditions of the mirror—whether it is cracked, warped, spotted, or otherwise modified by both collective and personal experience. All images—and this is particularly true of regional images or patterns of belief about the nature and content of a definable area—are distorted and discolored by the quality of the minds in which they have been lodged.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that William Goetzmann has spoken of explorers as being “programmed” by the times and conditions in which they operated.<sup>6</sup> And it is for this reason also that we cannot speak accurately of “an image” of the Great Plains in the nineteenth century. Rather, we must speak of images; during the nineteenth century there was no single, universally accepted view of the plains. Rather, at any given time during the 1800s, there were a number of images, arranged on a continuum of opinion with the Great American Desert and the Garden of the World occupying polar positions. Acceptance of a view somewhere along this continuum depended in part on the nature of the geographical information available, but also on the geographical location and social position of the perceivers and on their motivations and goals with respect to the plains.

It is the purpose of this essay to present a brief description of the continuum of opinion as it existed during three periods of the nineteenth century: 1800–1825, 1825–1860, and 1860–1895. The source materials include both formal and informal geographic lore from which literate Americans developed their conflicting images of the Great Plains between 1800 and 1895. The formal lore consists of references to the plains in travel accounts (unofficial diaries and official government reports), geographies and atlases, and newspa-

pers and periodicals; the informal lore includes private correspondence and folk literature. While not all the available literature has been investigated, a representative sample of each type for each of the three time periods has been utilized. These samples have been selected so as to include materials published and available in different geographical areas and settings (such as the Northeast, the Southeast, the Middle West, the frontier, urban areas, and rural areas). Each sample group was subjected to content analysis for key words and phrases carrying connotations of either Garden or Desert elements. For example, words such as “desert,” “barren,” “sterile,” and “arid” were judged to be indicative of a Desert image of the plains, while words such as “fertile,” “pleasant,” “salubrious,” “pasture,” “meadow,” and “savanna” were assumed to carry Garden connotations. On the basis of the content analysis, judgments were made as to the probability of the image held by a particular group in a specific region during a particular time period being oriented toward either the Garden or Desert poles of the continuum of opinion. In addition, lengthier descriptions that seemed typical of the images (again, on the basis of the content analysis) have been selected and are cited as examples.<sup>7</sup>

#### MR. JEFFERSON'S GARDEN AND THE DESERT OF THE LOUISIANANS, 1800–1825

The dawning of the nineteenth century saw few Americans indeed who possessed information—or even opinions—on the Great Plains. The region was partially known to explorers and fur traders of France and Spain, the European colonial powers that had been active in the Missouri Valley since the middle of the preceding century.<sup>8</sup> The image generated by the account of the early Louisiana fur trade explorers was decidedly desertlike, with references to “barren and dreary tracts” appearing in the explorers’ travel accounts; but only a minimal amount of this lore was available to the general American public until the sale of the vast territory of Louisiana to the young

republic in 1803.<sup>9</sup> Then the floodgates of geographical data were opened and a flow of information about the territory (which included virtually all of the Great Plains region) burst upon an American population that was ill-equipped to understand what it was they had acquired. By the end of 1804 editors of newspapers and magazines, government officials, land speculators, and publishers in general had dredged up and reprinted nearly every piece of information currently obtainable on the Louisiana Territory. From this lore, and from the recorded reactions of Americans to it, it is possible to derive the nature of American attitudes toward the plains in the opening years of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

The United States in 1804 was an agricultural nation with an administration in Washington that was operating on President Jefferson's assumptions of the ideal agrarian republic. In spite of the fact that among some segments of American society—particularly in the urban centers of the Northeast—agrarian expansionism was viewed with disfavor, most American images of the interior during that year seem to have been colored with optimism and hope—a hope that the lands west of the Mississippi would provide a firm base for the agrarian republic and an optimism that this would prove to be the case. The early controversy over the purchase of Louisiana had engendered frequent references, in the American press and in congressional debates, to the contemporary French and Spanish view of the trans-Mississippi West as inhospitable in the extreme.<sup>11</sup> But as the circulation of information about Louisiana increased, it became clear that the pessimistic viewpoint was acceptable only to a small minority. The predominating concept of the plains, as evidenced in the popular press, was that the region was Garden, with soils extremely fertile and climates benign, soft, and (in a favorite word of the time) “salubrious.”

A survey of periodical and other literature pertaining to the plains in the year 1804 shows a total of 54 items.<sup>12</sup> In these, the words “barren,” “sterile,” and “waste” appeared a

total of only 6 times and the word “desert” (as an expression of aridity rather than of openness or emptiness) appeared not at all. Many people believed that the immense plains of the interior stretched all the way to the Pacific and, contrary to the best information from the Missouri River traders, that these plains were not barren and sandy or even partially arid. One of the foremost authorities on the western regions of North America was Jefferson himself; in his official report to Congress on the lands of Louisiana, he noted the treelessness of the region drained by the Missouri and Platte rivers but attributed the lack of forest vegetation to a soil that was simply too rich for the growth of trees.<sup>13</sup> In 1804 the plains were Garden, full of hope and not disillusionment, and the word “desert” still meant the same thing as “deserted.” The poets would record the fact:

Toward the desert turn our anxious eyes,  
To see 'mong wilderness stately cities rise,  
Where the wild beast now holds his gloomy  
den,  
To see shine forth the blessed abodes of  
men.  
The rich luxuriance of a teeming soil,  
Rewards with affluence the farmer's toil,  
All nature round him breathes a rich  
perfume,  
His harvest ripens and his orchards bloom.<sup>14</sup>

The year 1804 was about the last time in the nineteenth century when anything approaching unanimity of opinion about the Great Plains prevailed. Two decades later, the enthusiastic and nearly unanimous view of the Jeffersonian Garden had deteriorated into a continuum of opinion that ranged from Garden to Desert. By 1825 the Great American Desert had begun to appear as a name and as a unifying image of the Great Plains in some of the source materials. A generation of government explorers in the West had encountered what their forest backgrounds led them to believe were arid conditions in the plains, and their reports established, for some elements of

the population at least, the idea of the interior plains as deserts akin to those of Africa or Araby.<sup>15</sup>

Of all the travel accounts during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, none was more important for fixing the idea of the Desert in receptive minds than Edwin James's account of Major Stephen Long's expedition to the central plains in 1820.<sup>16</sup> Some present-day writers have tried to fix the blame for the Great American Desert concept on such explorers as Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, John Bradbury, Henry M. Breckenridge, or Thomas Nuttall.<sup>17</sup> Each of these had mentioned the presence of desert conditions on the Great Plains, but most of these references were locationally restrictive: Lewis and Clark's desert, for example, was limited to a 15-to-20-mile stretch of badlands along the upper Missouri. Although some observers, such as Pike, were more explicit in describing the Great Plains as a vast, arid region and a potential barrier to westward settlement and migration, the concept did not receive wide circulation until the publication of the James account in the early 1820s. From the central portion of what is now Oklahoma to the Rocky Mountains, James noted, there stretched a wide and sandy desert:

We have little apprehension of giving too unfavorable an account of this portion of the country. Though the soil is in some places fertile, the want of timber, of navigable streams, of water for the necessities of life, render it an unfit residence for any but a nomad population. The traveler who shall at any time have traversed its desolate sands will, we think, join us in the wish that this region may forever remain the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, the prairie wolf.<sup>18</sup>

It did not take long for this colorful description to reach the public, and by 1825 a number of newspapers in the major urban centers of the Northeast had printed the following account or one similar to it:

AMERICAN DESERT. There is an extensive desert in the territory of the United States west of the Mississippi which is described in Long's Expedition to the Rocky Mountains. It extends from the base of the Rocky Mountains 400 miles to the east and is 500 from north to south. There are deep ravines in which the brooks and rivers meander, skirted by a few stunted trees, but all the elevated surface is barren desert, covered with sand, gravel, pebbles, etc. There are a few plants but nothing like a tree is to be seen on these desolate plains, and seldom is a living creature met with. The Platte, the Arkansas, and other rivers flow through this dreary waste.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the seeming dominance of the Desert concept in period literature and in spite of the conventional interpretation that most Americans viewed the Great Plains as Desert during this period, a survey of the source material reveals that the image of the plains as Desert seems to have been restricted to certain portions of the country and to certain segments of the population.<sup>20</sup> Content analysis of the literature indicates that the Desert image was strongest in the urban centers of the Northeast, particularly in New England, and weakest in the rural areas of the South and trans-Appalachian West. Among the geographies and textbooks printed during the entire period from 1820 to 1825, there were ten that described desert conditions in the Great Plains, although only two of these referred specifically to a "Great American Desert." Eight of the ten were published and received their widest distribution in New England. Of all the geographies available in 1825, only about half mentioned the presence of deserts in the western interior and all but two of these were published in the Northeast. In newspapers and periodical literature published in the urban centers of Boston, Hartford, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, descriptions of the interior as desert outweighed other descriptions by a 3-to-2 ratio. In small-town newspapers in New England and New York, however,

desert descriptions were noted in only 2 of 34 papers examined. And in the papers published in Washington, Alexandria, Richmond, and Charleston, references to "plains," "prairies," "meadows," or "savannas" were three times as frequent as were references to "desert." Descriptions of the interior as desert were even more rare in small-town papers in the South and in all papers of the trans-Appalachian region: only two papers (in Cincinnati and New Orleans) carried desert descriptions and both of these were reprints of earlier French-Spanish lore. Although the Great American Desert had become, by 1825, a feature of American attitudes toward the plains, it is clear that we are seeing the beginning of division of opinion along regional and social lines. Acceptance of the Desert concept was more likely among the well-educated elite, particularly in the Northeast, and acceptance of the Garden notion greater among the rural populations, particularly in the South and West. There was a tendency, then, for those who opposed western expansion to be receptive to the Desert image, while those who favored aggressive westward expansion believed that the plains were grasslands that would blossom like the rose when occupied by American settlers.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE GREAT MIGRATIONS AND THE GARDEN-DESERT CONTINUUM, 1825-1860

A generation later, by the middle of the 1840s, the concept of the plains as Desert had become prevalent, but contrary to the conventional interpretation, even in the forties the Desert image was not the exclusive one. The year 1845 is critical, for it marked the real beginning of the migration of Americans across the plains to Oregon and California. An examination of the sources of American images of the plains in that year does not support the contention, inherent in the conventional argument, that the folk migration failed to halt on the Great Plains because that region was viewed so unfavorably by the migrants themselves. It is true that 12 out of 13

geography books published in the first half of the 1840s described the plains as a desert and that 5 of the 12 referred specifically to the Great American Desert.<sup>22</sup> But again, it is also true that 11 of the 12 were published in the Northeast.<sup>23</sup> A survey of newspapers and periodicals for 1845 reveals almost the same situation in regard to the Garden-Desert continuum. The major urban papers of the Northeast carried references to desert conditions more than twice as frequently as references to prairies, plains, meadows, pastures, or savannas. For the small home-town weeklies the picture is different, and descriptions of deserts in the western interior were rare in the rural areas of the Northeast and almost nonexistent in the South and West.

If, as the evidence suggests, the notion of the plains as a desert was not the exclusive view of the interior in 1845, particularly among the segments of the population most likely to be emigrating (the rural populations, both in the settled East and in the frontier areas of the West), then some other explanation must be offered to explain the failure of the folk migration to settle on the plains during the 1840s and 1850s. The answer would seem to lie in the nature of the emigration and of the migrants themselves. A clue may be found in the works of one of the migrants' most influential spokesmen, John Charles Frémont. In the reports of his expeditions of 1842 and 1843-44, after he had crossed what earlier government explorers had termed that Great American Desert, Frémont gave the Desert notion short shrift. "The valley of the Platte," he wrote, "looked like a garden; so rich was the verdure of the grasses, and so luxuriant the bloom of abundant flowers."<sup>24</sup> But if the Great Plains were Garden, what lay beyond was even better in Frémont's estimation, and herein lies the primary reason for the leapfrogging American migration across the plains.

By 1845 the American frontier was bursting with what one Missouri newspaper editor called "perfect Oregon fever." The propagandists, such as Frémont and his father-in-law,

Senator Thomas Hart Benton, who encouraged migration to Oregon, did not deny the agricultural potential of the plains. They simply made Oregon—as a concept, not really as a geographical location—the logical and desirable culmination of the American drive to the Pacific that was finally articulated in 1845 as “Manifest Destiny.” First to the western sea—the gaps could be filled in later. The propagandists had the faith of the folk and they spoke with the voice of the folk—a voice that those who wrote the geographies and drew the maps carrying “Great American Desert” captions seldom heard. The drive to the West must be carried all the way—not because what lay in between was worthless but because what lay at the end of the rainbow trail was so good.<sup>25</sup> “The plains and prairies of the interior,” wrote one Oregon propagandist, “are extensive and are verdant with grass and shrubbery of luxuriant growth.” But the land beyond the Rockies was preferred because it was not as level as the plains and “an undulating surface of territory or a surface chiefly broken into hills and mountains is, in almost every consideration, preferable to one that is level.”<sup>26</sup> Another proponent of Oregon settlement described the climate of the plains as “salubrious, little subject to extensive and flooding rains, more remote from the sea and sheltered by stupendous mountains.” But beyond the Rockies, to the West, was a climate even better: “remarkably mild . . . the most favored spot of Providence . . . a land of savanna.”<sup>27</sup> It is apparent that the drive to Oregon went considerably beyond any simple rejection of the land that lay athwart the migrant’s path to the land of savanna.<sup>28</sup>

To substantiate further the point that the folk elements of American society did not see the plains as Desert during the great migrations, one need only look at the records of those who crossed the plains on their way to Oregon or California, and then consult the literature for the year 1860, when the migration began to diminish.<sup>29</sup> A survey of the diaries of Mormon migrants of the late 1840s, for example, shows that no diary mentioned

the Great American Desert by name and only 3 out of 160 writers used the word desert in reference to the territory east of the Rockies.<sup>30</sup> An examination of 31 travel accounts of forty-niners turns up only two references to the existence of desert conditions.<sup>31</sup> An analysis of 92 other travel journals and diaries from the years preceding the Civil War uncovers only 17 references to desert conditions in the Great Plains. Significantly, the great majority of these writers were from New England and the Middle Atlantic states. Of the 35 diaries in this group that could properly be called “folk” diaries—written by people from rural backgrounds—there were none that refer to the Great American Desert by name and only 2 that describe desert conditions.<sup>32</sup>

A survey of the literature for 1860 further supports the idea of a regional division of opinion regarding the Great Plains. In the metropolitan newspapers of the East, the majority view was still of the Great Plains as a region that one Boston paper called “uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence.”<sup>33</sup> But with the incurable optimism of the frontier, 43 out of 51 descriptions of the Great Plains in papers published in Illinois, Ohio, Mississippi, Louisiana, Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska Territory were couched in favorable terminology. The area to which Edwin James had given the appellation “Great American Desert” had become “an interminable meadow of infinite wealth and value.”

Among the numerous travel accounts and guide books published between 1845 and 1860, the descriptions of the Great Plains were even more glowing. The authors of the guidebooks, in particular, performed feats of geographical legerdemain, shrinking the Rockies to molehills and transforming the plains to flower-bedecked highways. Witness this description of the valley of the Platte: “As a whole it presents to the eye a pretty flower garden, walled in by huge piles of argillaceous rock, and watered by murmuring streamlets whose banks are ornamented with shade trees and shrubbery.”<sup>34</sup> The soil of the plains, according to many authors, was unbelievably fertile, producing sponta-



neous crops of oats, flax, and luxuriant grasses: "Here is the finest pasturage for cattle, sheep, or horses. Hundreds of thousands of acres are covered with barley. The flocks of all New England might be fattened here."<sup>35</sup> If the traveler tired of his journey to the riches of Oregon or California, the implication of the guidebooks was that he might take a farm at almost any point between the Mississippi and the Rockies.

The issue is not whether these garden descriptions of the Great Plains, any more than the wide and sandy desert of Edwin James, were accurate reflections of the plains landscape. The issue is that, in 1860, some people were willing to accept as gospel the Desert of the atlases and geographies, while others believed in the Garden of the guidebooks. Acceptance or rejection of these two polar images—and the range of opinion in between—depended not upon the mere availability of information but on the mental set of those to whom the information was transmitted. In the year preceding the Civil War, then, there was still a range of opinion about the plains environment, but the range had been compressed somewhat. That is, those who held the view of the plains as Desert were no longer as numerous or as definite in their descriptions as they had been in, say, 1845. Nor was the view of the Garden of the World as widely accepted as it had been at the beginning of the century. A continuum still existed, however, with the well-educated of the Northeast tending toward acceptance of the Desert concept and with the rural folk population of the interior leaning toward the Garden definition of the Great Plains. The structure of this image continuum would undergo considerable change during the last third of the nineteenth century.

#### GRAZING GROUNDS, GRASSLAND, GARDEN, AND GRASSHOPPERS: 1860–1895

During the years following the Civil War, the livestock industry moved north from Texas and began the first serious utilization of

the Great Plains. This economic activity was immensely successful during the seventies and gave rise to a new conception of the plains—they were now "the All Year Grazing Country," "the Great Winter Grazing Ground," or "the Great Western Pastoral Region." These terms appeared in more than half of the newspaper descriptions of the plains in 1870, in all sections of the country. But not all Americans were sold on the image of the plains as a perennial pasture. To the farmer of the Midwest, to the railroads, and to the land speculator, the notion of the plains as a livestock region was unacceptably exclusive; by the middle of the 1870s terms such as "Continental Wheat Belt" and the "Northern Tropical Belt" began to appear, particularly in those eastern papers manipulated by banks that were, in turn, controlled by the railroads. The concept of the "Isothermal Zodiac," a pseudoclimatic theory developed in the 1850s that "proved" that the central portions of North America were the optimum climate for agriculture, was rejuvenated in the seventies.<sup>36</sup>

Most of the propaganda about the farmers' paradise on the plains came from the railroad companies, who were anxious to sell at good prices the lands that the government had granted them along their routes. Publicists for the railroads assailed any notions of the Desert as harmless myth and—in spite of the fact that the glowing descriptions of the plains as Garden of the World stimulated criticism—the publicists were believed. Their propaganda influenced the thousands of farmers who moved onto the lands beyond the 100th meridian in the 1870s—many of them, curiously enough, moving back from the Pacific and intermountain fringes.<sup>37</sup> It also influenced the United States government; much of the federal land policy in the last third of the century was predicated on the notion that the plains were Garden or, at least, could be made Garden by plowing the grasses under, planting trees, or irrigating the drier soils.<sup>38</sup> The railroads continued to enlist western adventurers, army officers, and government officials in their cause.<sup>39</sup> By 1880 the view of the plains that was most

widely reported in the newspapers, the geographies and atlases, and the regional descriptive literature was of the plains as prime agricultural land.<sup>40</sup> Witness the following:

Ride over these fertile acres of Dakota, and behold the working of this latest triumph of American genius. You are in a sea of wheat. The railroad train rolls through an ocean of grain. Pleasant the music of the rippling waves as the west wind sweeps over the expanse. There has been no failure of crops from drought, excessive rains, blight, mildew, rust, or other influence of climatology . . . the fields are smiling with bounty.<sup>41</sup>

The last-ditch fight against this Garden of Eden conception was carried on in some of the more independent newspapers of the East and of the larger western cities as a handful of pessimists (some of whom may have had money invested in the livestock industry) fought a rear-guard action against the publicists. Some detractors called the highly favorable reports of the railroad propagandists "pure myth," noting that the entire area of the Great Plains beyond the 100th meridian suffered from a lack of water and was unfit for cultivation except in a few detached places. "The comparative worthlessness of this great tract of land," wrote one critic, "is owing to the insufficient fall of rain. From this general statement is to be excepted only the very limited valleys that can be irrigated and the beneficial effects of an occasional wet season."<sup>42</sup> To discover who was right—the railroads or their critics—many eastern papers sent field correspondents onto the plains to get the story firsthand. Typical of their reactions was this report:

Grass, water and timber of several varieties are found in abundance, and all of excellent quality; small fruits abound; game is plentiful. The valleys are well adapted for cattle raising or for agricultural purposes, while the scenery is lovely beyond description. The flora is the most varied and

exuberant of any section this side of California. In this respect it is a new Florida: it may prove to be a new Eldorado.<sup>43</sup>

The railroad propagandists had their way, and in the editorial policies of newspapers in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati in 1880, opinion ran 3-to-1 in favor of the Garden image of the plains. Virtually no words unfavorable to the quality of the plains came from the papers in Chicago, Omaha, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and Denver during the same year. Similarly, references to a high agricultural potential for the plains outweighed pessimistic appraisals by nearly a 4-to-1 margin in the descriptive geographical literature, regardless of location of publication or distribution. The strength of the Garden concept, particularly in the areas adjacent to the Great Plains, is evidenced by the large numbers of migrants that moved onto the plains in the 1880s; the opinion of the critics that "the American farmer will not take up residence here for a long time to come" was proved false. The structure of the continuum of opinion had obviously undergone considerable change since 1860: now the elite of the northeastern urban areas, as well as the folk elements of the rural sections of the entire country, tended to accept the Garden images of the plains. For a time, there was agreement on the land quality of the Great Plains that rivaled the unanimity of Mr. Jefferson's Garden. But the consensus was short-lived.

At the same time that this apparent universality of opinion began to emerge in the published literature, around 1880, the Garden image seemed to be losing ground among pioneers in the vanguard of settlement, as evidenced in their folk literature, correspondence, diaries, and journals. Always before, those at the leading edge of the population advance had been the most willing to believe in the existence of a Garden further west. But with the move onto the plains in the 1870s, the realities of an uncertain environment began to temper enthusiasm for the Garden of the World, at least among the plains residents

themselves. While it is true that many of the newspapers in the small towns that began to spring up in the Dakotas, western Nebraska and Kansas, and eastern Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana continued to offer booming statements about the value of their territories, many others began to sound a note of disillusionment.

June 10, 1880. Unless the yield this fall of moss agates and prickly pears should be unusually large, the agricultural export will be very far below preceding years and there may be actual suffering. . . . I do not wish to discourage those who might wish to come to this place for the purpose of engaging in agriculture, but frankly I will state that it has its drawbacks. The climate is erratic, eccentric, and peculiar. . . . Aside from these little drawbacks and the fact that nothing grows without irrigation except white oak clothespins and promissory notes drawing two per cent interest per month, the prospects for the agricultural future is gratifying in the extreme.<sup>44</sup>

The words of the folk themselves provide an even more dramatic picture of the harsh realities of plains agriculture in the seventies.<sup>45</sup> The only consistent feature of the plains environment is its inconsistency, and the plains dwellers quickly discovered the relationship between that inconsistency and their agricultural hopes. Rain is always promised and seldom present; both heat and cold are extreme, and shifts from one to the other can (and do) take place within a few hours; blizzards roar across the plains bearing a freight load of snow that can bury farms and farmers alike; and always the twister, evoking terror in those who had seen one before and those who had not. There is not much small weather on the plains, and most of the residents' commentary on the weather was outsized as well; references in the folk literature to "unusual" weather (meaning different from the more humid lands to the east) outstrip other references by almost 2-to-1.

Second to comments on weather during the seventies were descriptions of the grasshopper invasions that wiped out crops in several promising years. "Looking at the empty sky above me," wrote one plains farmer, "feeling the rush of the dry earth beneath my feet, seeing the dust and decay, I saw how much I had dared and how little, how pitifully little, I had won." Even more telling is the refrain of a folk song that was popular enough in the seventies to circulate in at least two dozen different versions, with only the name of the county changing:

Then come to Ford County, there's a home  
for you all,  
Where wind never ceases, and the rain  
never falls,  
Where the sun never sinks but always  
remains,  
'Til it cooks you all up on your government  
claims.

Hurrah for Ford County, where blizzards  
arise,  
Where the wind's never cinched and the fall  
never dies.  
Then come join its corps and tell of its fame,  
All you poor hungry men that stuck on a  
claim.

O' it's here I am and here I will stay,  
My money's all gone and I can't get away.  
There is nothing that makes a man more  
hard and profane,  
Than a'starvin' to death on a government  
claim.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the seventies, while agricultural experts, railroad promoters, and government officials and politicians continued to wax enthusiastic over the plains prospect, the experiences of the new plainsmen modified their views of the region. Although the plains were not exactly a Great American Desert, they could hardly be considered the Garden of the World.

The attitudes of plainsmen toward their

environment have always been a blend of optimism and pessimism—just as the environment itself swings from years of too much water to years of too little. During the 1880s, the folk literature again tended to be hopeful, speaking of bumper crops and of independence from the eastern establishment and the bankers. The eighties were free of the droughts and grasshopper invasions of the seventies, and the blizzards that did occur were much more damaging to the cattlemen than to the farmers, who by that time represented the overwhelming majority of Great Plains population. The press—both eastern and western—continued to boom the agricultural potential of what were now being called, almost universally, the “prairies”—a term hitherto reserved for the more humid grasslands of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. Propagandists began to speak of the “conquest” of the Great Plains by farmers. The plainsmen themselves were generally more optimistic as well. Farm failure was still a consistent feature of plains life, and disillusionment gripped many who had come to the plains hoping for a piece of the Garden; but for many, the “museum of wonder and value” that had been promised was becoming reality in the bumper years of the eighties.

This optimism, like the pessimism of the late seventies, was short-lived. In the nineties, desolate and parched years followed the abundance of the previous decade. Once again the variable environment of the plains asserted itself and launched a new campaign of drought against the agricultural invaders. Nearly half of the population that had moved onto the plains in the 1880s moved out again in the 1890s.<sup>47</sup> As both rural and urban populations fell, talk of the great agricultural bonanza died upon the lips of the enthusiasts. Eastern newspapers in 1895 carried many tales of disasters on the plains; references to the Garden of the World were few and far between and usually tongue-in-cheek.

A survey of the small-town newspapers that still remained on the plains themselves indicates that the farmers were fighting for their very existence against the uncertainties of

the environment. With the curious blend of hope and despair that was, by now, characteristic of the plains mentality, the editors of plains newspapers looked back to the earlier times and remembered the parched days of the seventies. Drought years had come and gone before; seasons of plenty were sure to return. Most of what these writers offered their readers was hope. The Garden-Desert continuum was still a feature of American thought; but it differed from earlier versions in that the swing of opinion on the quality of the plains was now taking place among the occupiers of the grassland environment. No longer did the continuum represent differences between elite eastern attitudes and the views of a western rural folk population. In the land of environmental extremes that is the Great Plains, extremes of opinion began to abound—depending upon the character of the plains environment at the time.

Since the last years of the nineteenth century, this cycle of opinion has replaced the continuum that existed throughout the 1800s. Plainsmen have alternately been attracted to and repulsed by their environment, seeing it now as Garden, now as Desert. Still, in the total range of attitudes toward the plains, the Garden image has dominated. The amount of land used for agricultural purposes on the plains has increased fourfold since 1900.

Perhaps the central and most important fact we can learn from an examination of the prevalent attitudes toward the plains in the nineteenth century is that these views have always been subjective; the geography of hope has always been more important than the geography of reality. Some would claim that there is something about the plains environment itself that engenders this subjectivity. As both a native plainsman and a student of environmental attitudes, I would be foolish to dismiss that possibility out of hand. Listen to the words of Nebraska writer Wright Morris:

There is nothing much to see, but perhaps that is why one goes on looking. . . . The gaze turns inward and the Plains,

both dry and wet, is a fact that recedes, like everything else, into fiction. . . . In this landscape the tongue is dry but the mind is wet. A scud of cloud waters the imagination, fictions spring up. Where there is almost nothing to see, there man sees the most.

## NOTES

This paper was delivered as the keynote address at the Fourth Wyoming American Studies Conference, at the University of Wyoming, Laramie, October 1983.

1. The literature on the Great American Desert Concept and its role in American history is extensive. Some of the most detailed accounts may be found in: Ralph C. Morris, "The Notion of a Great American Desert East of the Rockies," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13 (1926): 190-200; Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931), pp. 152-60; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 174-83; R. W. Dillon, "Stephen Long's Great American Desert," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 111 (1967): 93-108; T. L. Alford, "The West as a Desert in American Thought Prior to Long's 1819-1820 Expedition," *Journal of the West* 8 (1969): 515-25; G. Malcolm Lewis, "Early American Exploration and the Cis-Rocky Mountain Desert, 1803-1823," *Great Plains Journal* 5 (1965): 1-11; G. Malcolm Lewis, "Regional Ideas and Reality in the Cis-Rocky Mountain West," *Transactions and Papers of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, old series (1966): 135-50; and W. Eugene Hollon, *The Great American Desert: Then and Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). For an excellent historiographical treatment of the idea of the Great American Desert, see Martyn J. Bowden, "The Great American Desert in the American Mind," in *Geographies of the Mind*, ed. D. Lowenthal and M. Bowden, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 119-47.

2. Quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, pp. 182-83.

3. The Garden myth is amply discussed in Smith's *Virgin Land*, book 3, chaps. 11 to 22; see also Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

4. An excellent account of the epistemology of

the Garden-Desert idea may be found in Verdell Frederick Borth, "Geographical Epistemology: The Growth and Limits of Geographical Inquiry" Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1978).

5. For an expansion of this line of reasoning, see the works of John Kirtland Wright, particularly *Human Nature in Geography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966); see also David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden, eds., *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Honor of John Kirtland Wright* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

6. William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. xi.

7. I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to those historical geographers of the Clark University school of historical geography—Bradley Baltensperger, Merlin Lawson, Richard Jackson, and above all, our mentor, Martyn Bowden—whose research on nineteenth-century images of the American West in general and the Great Plains in particular has played a cardinal role in the development of the ideas and in the supplying of data for this paper. I have relied on Baltensperger's data for settlers' views of the plains in the latter third of the nineteenth century, on Lawson for diary materials from the forty-niner migrations, on Jackson for diary material relevant to the Mormon migrations before the Civil War, and on Bowden for his content analysis of school geographies, textbooks, and atlases between 1800 and 1882, of newspaper editorials from 1849 to 1859, and of letters and manuscript diaries of 1843 to 1854. Relevant works by these scholars are cited in subsequent notes.

8. See John L. Allen, *Passage through the Garden* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), chap. 1; also Abraham P. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804* (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952).

9. See Alford, "West as Desert"; and Borth, "Geographical Epistemology," pp. 112-27.

10. See John L. Allen, "Geographical Knowledge and American Images of Louisiana Territory," in *Western Historical Quarterly* 2 (1971): 151-70.

11. John L. Allen, "Geographical Images of the American Northwest" (Ph.D. diss. Clark University, 1969), chaps. 2-3.

12. The literature consulted includes newspapers published in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Alexandria, Savannah, Charleston,

New Orleans, and St. Louis; periodical literature published in 1804; and gazeteers, geographies, and atlases available in that year. Given the total number of references to the Great Plains region in the literature (well over 200), the stated total of 54 items might seem surprisingly small. In fact, many more references than that occur in the literature. But there are only 54 separate items, many of them appearing in more than one publication and some of them occurring literally dozens of times.

13. Thomas Jefferson, "An Official Account of Louisiana," in *American State Papers: Miscellaneous*, vol. 20, p. 346. This account was also widely cited in the periodical literature, appearing a total of 49 times in 1804 alone.

14. W. M. P., "A Poem on the Acquisition of Louisiana" (Charleston, S.C., 1804). This poem was widely reprinted in contemporary newspapers.

15. An interesting assessment of the actual climate of the Great Plains during various periods of the first half of the nineteenth century, in relation to the recorded observations of explorers, may be found in Merlin P. Lawson, *The Climate of the Great American Desert* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974); see pp. 33–54.

16. The "official" account of the Long expedition was compiled by one of Long's party, Dr. Edwin James, and published as *An account of an expedition . . . to the Rocky Mountains. . .* A reprint edition is in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1905), vols. 14–17. Included in the official account is Long's own "General Description of the Country Traversed by the Exploring Expedition," in which the concept of the Great American Desert is given extensive treatment.

17. Cf. Alford, "West as Desert," pp. 515–20.

18. James, *Account*, vol. 16, pp. 173–74.

19. *National Intelligencer* (Alexandria, Virginia), 11 October 1825.

20. This notion was suggested as early as 1952 by James C. Malin in *The Grasslands of North America* (Lawrence, Kans.: Privately printed, 1952). But the seminal study is a paper by Martyn J. Bowden, "The Perception of the Western Interior of the United States, 1800–1870," *Proceedings of the Association of American Geographers* 1 (1969): 16–21. On the premise that most of the scholars writing about the Great American Desert have relied upon the presence of desert references in school geographies, textbooks, and atlases, Bowden utilized these source materials in his study, considering those texts

with more than 120 words describing the geography of the western interior. He performed content analysis of these passages to determine the presence or absence of desert or nondesert descriptions. The table presenting his content analysis is found on page 18 of his 1969 paper.

21. Malin, *Grasslands*, p. 443.

22. See Martyn J. Bowden, "The Great American Desert and the American Frontier, 1800–1882: Popular Images of the Plains," in *Anonymous Americans*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 48–79. Again, Bowden used content analysis of school geographies in deriving "popular images" of the plains. To these, however, he added content analysis of newspapers published between 1849 and 1859, of letters and manuscript diaries from 1843 to 1854, and of travelers' accounts, explorers' journals, and land survey records (see tables on pages 51, 55, and 63). Like his earlier work cited above, Bowden's 1971 essay has provided some of the content analysis data utilized here.

23. The lone exception was a work published in French in New Orleans, which was a reprint of a much earlier account by a French traveler of the late eighteenth century.

24. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, eds., *Expeditions of John Charles Fremont* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), vol. 1. This is a magnificently edited and annotated version of the original government reports of Fremont's 1842 and 1843–44 expeditions, along with extensive correspondence bearing upon his travels.

25. John L. Allen, "The New England Reaction to Lewis and Clark: Hall Jackson Kelley and the Propagandists" (Paper presented to the New England–St. Lawrence Valley regional division of the Association of American Geographers, Worcester, Mass., November 1968).

26. See Hall Jackson Kelley, *Geographical Sketch of Oregon*, 20th Cong., 1st sess., 1828, Doc. 139, n.p.

27. Cited in Clark Spence, ed., *The American West: A Source Book* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 102.

28. For a further explication of this theme, see Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision, 1846* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942).

29. An excellent recent study of the great migrations is John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

30. See Richard Jackson, "Vision versus Reality: The Mormon Perception of the Environment, 1840-1865" (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1971.) Also see Jackson's "Mormon Perception and Settlement," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 68 (1978): 317-34, and "The Overland Journey to Zion," in *The Mormon Role in the Settlement of the West*, ed. Richard H. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), pp. 1-27. The latter study presents a particularly useful summary of commentary on the Great Plains in the diaries and journals of Mormon migrants.
31. See Lawson, *Climate of the Great American Desert*, pp. 55-77.
32. Bowden, "Great American Desert," p. 63.
33. *Boston Gazette*, 7 August 1860, p. 1.
34. Rufus B. Sage, *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains* (originally published in 1846; Boston: Wentworth, 1858), pp. 76-77.
35. Franklin Langworthy, *Scenery of the Plains, Mountains, and Mines* (Ogdensburgh, N.Y.: J. C. Sprague, 1855), p. 49.
36. G. Malcolm Lewis, "William Gilpin and the Concept of the Great Plains Region," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 56 (1966): 33-51, gives an excellent account of the origin and application of the theory of the isothermal zodiac. See also David Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), pp. 11 and 37.
37. See Unruh, *The Plains Across*, p. 400.
38. An incisive and detailed account of the relationship between environmental attitudes and governmental land policy is Walter M. Kollmorgen, "The Woodsman's Assaults on the Domain of the Cattleman," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59 (1969): 215-39. By this time, of course, there was a considerable body of scientific knowledge about the plains, deriving from government exploration from the period of the Pacific Railroad surveys to the more "pure" scientific expeditions of people like John Wesley Powell. While this information was more accurate than much that had gone before, it did little to alter the nature of American images until late in the nineteenth century—and then the alteration was selective, with both Garden and Desert proponents extracting from the scientific accounts data that might bolster their beliefs. See John L. Allen, "Working the West: Public Land Policy, Exploration, and the Pre-academic Evolution of American Geography," in *The Origin of American Academic Geography*, ed. Brian Blouet (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1981), pp. 57-68.
39. See Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands*; and Edgar I. Stewart, collector and editor, *Penny-an-Acre Empire in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).
40. Cf. L. P. Brockett, *Our Western Empire: or, The New West Beyond the Mississippi* (Chicago, 1882); and C. W. Dana, *The Great West; or, The Garden of the World* (Boston, 1861).
41. Cited in John Conron, ed., *The American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 377.
42. Cited in Stewart, *Penny-an-Acre Empire*, p. 184.
43. Ibid., p. 115. In "The Emergence of 'Middle West' as an American Regional Label," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (1984): 209-20, James R. Shortridge suggests that the pastoral image presented in this description had become, by the last third of the nineteenth century, one of the predominant themes associated with the Kansas-Nebraska area, certainly a "core area" of the Great Plains.
44. Bill Nye, "Wyoming Farms, Etc., Etc." in *Bill Nye's Western Humor*, ed. T. A. Larson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), pp. 26-27.
45. Bradley J. Baltensperger, "Plains Promoters and Plain Folk: Pre-migration and Post-settlement Images of the Central Great Plains" (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1974).
46. The author learned this version in 1963 from an old U.S. Forest Service employee whose father had homesteaded in Kansas in 1873.
47. U.S. Census data, 1890 and 1900; see also Robert G. Athearn, *High Country Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960).
48. Wright Morris, "Our Endless Plains," originally published in *Holiday* magazine in 1952; reprinted in *The Curtis-Doubleday World Atlas* (Garden City, N.Y.: Curtis-Doubleday, 1962), pp. 217-23.