

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2006

Review Essay: Encyclopedia of the Great Plains

William Ferris

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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



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

Ferris, William, "Review Essay: Encyclopedia of the Great Plains" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 123.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/123>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

REVIEW ESSAYS

Over a decade ago, the Center for Great Plains Studies began its sponsorship of the research program that led, in September of 2004, to the publication of the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. Under the general editorship of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Professor of Geography and Center Fellow David Wishart, the *Encyclopedia* was designed to become an important resource on the history, geography, and culture of the Plains region. To provide our readers with an overview of the volume as well as detailed appraisals of particular chapters, we invited prominent scholars to examine the *Encyclopedia* from their own professional perspectives. The results of our invitations follow.

* * * * *

Encyclopedia of the Great Plains. Edited by David J. Wishart. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xviii + 919 pp. Illustrations, index of contributors, general index. \$75.00.

OVERVIEW

A *New Yorker* “Profile” published on November 22, 1976, recounts Ralph Ellison’s being asked during a Douglass High School class reunion in Oklahoma City why, after living in New York City for so many years, he remained an Oklahoman. “It helps me to verify certain early hopes,” Ellison replied, “. . . my sense of possibility. . . . There is a blues lyric that goes . . .

I’m going to the nation,
Going to the territory.
Going to the nation, baby,
Going to the territory.

. . . . What does Huck say at the end of the book? He says . . . ‘I got to light out for the territory.’ Well, it is *Oklahoma* he is talking about.

Oklahoma was a dream world. And, after Reconstruction had been betrayed, people—black and white—came to the territory. Out of the territory came the state of Oklahoma. The people who know nothing of this dare to criticize me for being proud to have come from Oklahoma.”

How proud Ellison would be to see his work and that of so many other distinguished artists, writers, and musicians recognized in the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. The Great Plains roots of Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Cornel West, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Parker, and Jay McShann make emphatic the region’s importance in African American history and culture. Like their counterparts in the American South, these artists migrated to Chicago and

New York where they became leaders in the nation's cultural life.

As North Americans, we increasingly seek our identity in the places where we live, places that define us as surely as they shaped our ancestors and will mold future generations. The *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, developed and edited at the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, the oldest and largest regional center in the United States, is a profoundly important addition to a growing library of encyclopedias that explore U.S. regions like the South, the West, New England, the Midwest; major cities like New York and Chicago; and states like Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas—each funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since the Great Plains occupies the southern reaches of Canada's prairie provinces, *this* encyclopedia has a binational dimension as well.

The *Encyclopedia's* dramatic dust jacket photograph evokes the region's expanse and stark beauty: a purple and orange sky hovering above a meadow studded with stands of wild yellow-orange irises at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument in Nebraska. As the reader explores this handsomely illustrated volume, structured by twenty-seven comprehensive topics ranging from African Americans, Agriculture, and Art to Transportation, War, and Water, the rich physical and human history of the Great Plains unfolds.

Larry McMurtry remarks that "The Great Plains . . . feel at times like an almost forgotten region—and yet there are wonders in it." Both a real landscape and an intellectual concept, as editor David Wishart reminds us, the region is identified by physical, historical, and cultural characteristics. Physiographically, it is edged by the Rocky Mountains from Alberta to New Mexico and extends east in southern Canada from Alberta to Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Southward it ends at the Rio Grande, and on the east at the eastern border of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, including much of Oklahoma and western Texas. Challenged by weather, lack of forests, and

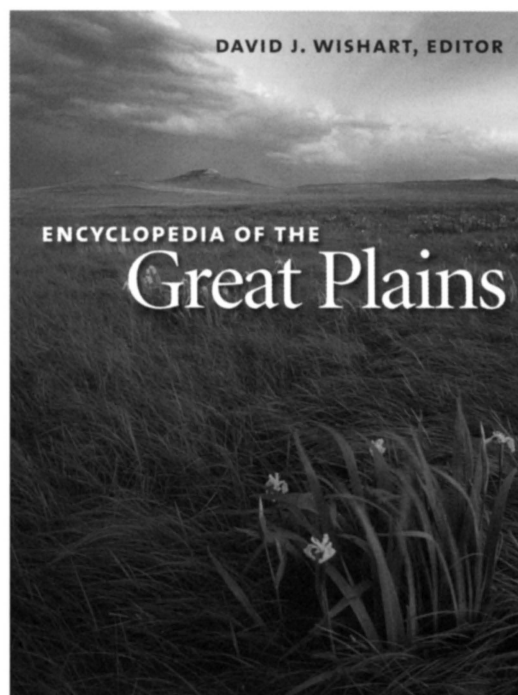


FIG. 1. *Dust jacket of Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, published by the University of Nebraska Press, 2004.*

sheer size, it is a place where, in the words of Jonathan Raban, there is "more space than place." Rainfall ranges from thirty inches a year in eastern Kansas to less than fifteen near the Rocky Mountains, and droughts of thirty-five or more consecutive days are common. Because of the absence of forests, European settlers built their homes from sod and used buffalo dung for fuel. With no westward-flowing rivers, settlers' journeys were arduous. Distances, vast grasslands, and limited population conveyed a sense of emptiness, and settlers often commented on the region's "loneliness."

Early architecture ranged from traditional Native American structures such as tipis and earth lodges to the sod-wall construction of European American settlers. Frank Lloyd Wright's "prairie style" homes—like the Sutton House in McCook, Nebraska—capture the spirit of the region. Barns, grain elevators, water towers, and windmills also define its constructed landscape. Dust Bowl photographers

captured the stark homesteads and communities destroyed by drought and windstorms. Contemporary photographers like Frank Gohlke focus their cameras on grain bins as they first loom in the distance, then grow progressively larger, and finally recede in the distance as travelers drive along the region's highways.

Distinctive cities and towns emerged in the region. African Americans formed all-black communities like Nicodemus, Kansas. Cattle towns, college towns, ghost towns, oil boomtowns, reservation towns, and "hell on wheels" towns all made appearances. As the Union Pacific crossed the Plains, towns quickly filled with gamblers, prostitutes, and saloon keepers who offered railroad workers entertainment. Many tents and shacks existed only for a few months, and violence was common.

Educational institutions in the Great Plains adapted to the region's needs in unique ways. One-room schoolhouses, Indian boarding schools, Boys Town, land-grant universities, and tribal colleges have all shaped Great Plains education. The *Encyclopedia* even notes that the familiar *Cliff Notes* study guides were launched by Cliff Hillegass in the basement of his home in Lincoln, Nebraska.

The diversity and scale of European American migration to the Great Plains is striking. Over the past two centuries groups ranging from Anglo-Canadians to Ukrainians, including Czechs, Danes, Finns, French-Canadians, Russians, Germans, Hungarians, Icelanders, Irish, Italians, Jews, Norwegians, Poles, Scots, Spaniards, Swedes, and Welch, made their homes in the region. One fourth of Iceland's population migrated to the Great Plains during the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Jews, many arriving as peddlers, over time developed significant communities in Winnipeg, Manitoba; Calgary, Alberta; Regina, Saskatchewan; Billings, Montana; Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska; Wichita, Kansas; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Amarillo and Fort Worth, Texas. Tillie Olsen, one of the region's most important Jewish writers, lived in Omaha, Nebraska, in the 1920s.

The impact of the Great Plains on American theater and film has been profound. From the era of silent films to the present, celebrities with roots in the region have shaped important careers. From Edmonton, Alberta (Michael J. Fox) to San Saba, Texas (Tommy Lee Jones) and from Denver, Colorado (Douglas Fairbanks Sr.) to Cherryvale, Kansas (Louise Brooks), stars are associated with Great Plains communities. Some of the region's most prominent film professionals include Robert Altman, Oscar Micheaux, Fatty Arbuckle, Fred Astaire, Marlon Brando, Lon Chaney, Montgomery Clift, Gary Cooper, Walt Disney, Henry Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Myrna Loy, Nick Nolte, Gordon Parks, Will Rogers, Robert Taylor, and Darryl Zanuck. Filmmakers like John Ford were attracted to the region and celebrated both its dramatic landscapes and history. Today critics refer to a "Plains aesthetic" when discussing films like *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

Great Plains folklore figures like Pecos Bill have inspired the national imagination. Folklorists J. Frank Dobie and John Lomax both grew up in Texas where they recorded cowboy songs and tales that attracted the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt who wrote a preface to Lomax's *Cowboy Songs*. Folklorist Hal Cannon created an annual celebration of cowboy poetry through the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering at Elko, Nevada. Roger Welsch explores Nebraska folklore as a writer and television commentator.

Calamity Jane, Nellie McClung, and Amelia Earhart suggest the diverse and significant roles of women in the Great Plains. Life in the region could be especially difficult for women, as suggested by the *Encyclopedia's* entries on "Mail-Order Brides" and "Mad Pioneer Women." The tradition of rodeo queens endures today, along with feminist worlds that support lesbian and gay life in rapidly growing communities in cities.

Hispanic Americans exert a growing influence in both the Great Plains and the nation through demographics and through political leaders like Linda Chavez, Federico Peña, and

Bill Richardson. Their labor is crucial to local industries, and their impact on the region's music, cuisine, and cultural life is increasingly important.

The *Encyclopedia* chapter on "Images and Icons" probes how the region is viewed from both within and without. Because of its size, it has long been considered an obstacle to travel. An entry on "Flyover Country" reflects on coastal elites who view it as an anonymous expanse between the East and West Coasts. This same world—with its turbulent weather—inspired L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, read by generations of children and their parents. Iconic western figures abound and include Buffalo Bill Cody, George Armstrong Custer, Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, and Doc Holliday. An entry on "Gunslingers" notes that most died violent deaths by gunshot or hanging. Wild Bill Hickok killed seven men, besides those he killed during the Civil War and in Indian engagements. Contemporary entries include "Missile Silos," "Mount Rushmore National Memorial," and "Windmills."

Industry in the Great Plains created a diverse economic history. The American Fur Company in the 1830s exported over 25,000 bison robes a year. Today agribusiness is central to the Great Plains economy, from livestock feedlots to ConAgra Foods. The scale of this contemporary agricultural world was foreshadowed by figures like Charles Goodnight who rode bareback from his home in Macoupin County, Illinois, to the Southern Plains of Texas in 1846. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century he and his partner John Adair amassed over one million acres at their JA Ranch where they ran 100,000 cattle.

Omaha native Warren Buffett began his business career modestly with jobs that included a newspaper route and selling used golf balls. His personal wealth grew from \$9,800 when he graduated from Columbia University in 1951 to \$30 billion in 2000.

Ted Waitt launched Gateway, Inc. in an abandoned farmhouse on his family's cattle ranch in South Dakota with a \$10,000 loan from his grandmother in 1985. By 1997 the

computer company's annual revenue was \$6.3 billion. Gateway celebrates its regional ties to the Great Plains through the recognizable Holstein cow markings on its packaging.

Edwin E. Perkins, another Great Plains entrepreneur, grew up in a sod house in Furnas County in south-central Nebraska. While working in his father's general store, Perkins experimented with kitchen chemistry and created Kool-Aid. When he died in 1961 he left an estate of \$45 million and a product synonymous with American childhood.

Abundant renewable wind power has led to the region being called the "Saudi Arabia of Wind Energy." If properly harnessed, wind power in North Dakota alone could provide one third of the nation's energy needs, while the Great Plains region could power the entire U.S.

The history of law in the Great Plains involves colorful figures like Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, Judge Roy Bean, and Bat Masterson. Law enforcement groups like the North-West Mounted Police played a prominent role in the Canadian Great Plains, while the Texas Rangers worked in South Texas. Cattle Codes, the Indian Claims Commission, and Leavenworth Penitentiary were also notable forces in the region's legal history.

But it is the outlaws who are celebrated in song, story, and film. Billy the Kid inspired hundreds of books, motion pictures, radio and television programs, and even a ballet. Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow during the Great Depression led authorities on a twenty-seven-month saga of robbery and killings between 1932 and 1934. The couple successfully used automatic weapons and automobiles to rob banks and escape capture in daring new ways.

American media have been deeply shaped by familiar faces and voices from the Great Plains. Well-known personalities include Tom Brokaw (Webster, South Dakota), Johnny Carson (Norfolk, Nebraska), Dick Cavett (Gibbon, Nebraska), Chet Huntley (Cardwell, Montana), and Eric Sevareid (Velva, North Dakota). Monte Hall, the host of *Let's Make a Deal*, is from Winnipeg, and Allen Neuharth, the founder of *USA Today*, was born in Eureka,

South Dakota. Increasingly important to every American household, the Internet began with the creation of MIDNET at the University of Nebraska.

The musical heritage of the Great Plains is wonderfully rich and includes pioneer, classical, cowboy, black, rockabilly, rock and roll, Hispanic, and Native American traditions. The work of jazz artists like Charlie Christian, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Parker, and Jack Teagarten offers a fascinating contrast to that of country musicians like Gene Autry, Waylon Jennings, K. D. Lang, Willie Nelson, Ernest Tubb, and Bob Wills. The region also produced important rock and roll stars like Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison. More recent popular artists include Garth Brooks, John Denver, the Dixie Chicks, Melissa Etheridge, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young. Classical composer, conductor, and champion of modern American music Howard Hanson was born and raised in Wahoo, Nebraska.

The largest section of the *Encyclopedia* is appropriately devoted to Native Americans. Its 138 entries, spanning fifty-five pages, treat fifty-nine tribes, many of which—like the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee—were moved to the Great Plains by the federal government. Other familiar tribes include the Apache, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Shoshone, and Sioux. Entries also treat Native American architecture, art, church, and radio. Portraits of celebrated Native American leaders like Nicholas Black Elk, Crazy Horse, Howling Wolf, and Sitting Bull offer insight into their strength and endurance. While Hollywood Indians were largely played by white actors, in 1940 a Cherokee actor named Victor Daniels organized a group of actors who applied to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for recognition as “De Mille Indians,” a new tribe of Native Americans who worked for the film industry.

Great Plains politics are as turbulent as the region's weather. Political leaders ranging from populists and progressives to reactionaries have influenced political affairs on both local and national levels. The region has given the U.S.

five presidents—George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, Dwight Eisenhower, Gerald Ford, and Lyndon Johnson—and Canada three prime ministers: R. B. Bennett, John Diefenbaker, and Stephen Harper. Other important national leaders in the U.S. include Linda Chavez, Bob Dole, Hubert Humphrey, Mike Mansfield, George McGovern, Bill Richardson, J. C. Watts, and Nancy Kassebaum. Prominent Canadian prairie politicians include Tommy Douglas, Peter Lougheed, Roy Romanow, and Ralph Klein.

The region has long been home to dissenters of all persuasions. In 1856 John Brown led the “Potawatomi Massacre” in Kansas, two years before his raid on Harper's Ferry. And sixty-nine years later, in 1925, Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska. Groups such as the American Agriculture Movement, the American Indian Movement, the IWW, Ku Klux Klan, and Posse Comitatus have all been active in the Great Plains. Entries in the “Protest and Dissent” chapter of the *Encyclopedia* include the “Cowboy Strike of 1883,” “Junta de Indignación,” the “On-to-Ottawa Trek,” the “Oklahoma City Bombing,” and the “Winnipeg General Strike.”

From Native Americans to recent settlers religion has remained a central feature of life in the Great Plains. The wide range of beliefs reflects the diversity of settlers who came to the area. Faith communities include Assemblies of God, Branch Davidians, Buddhists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Disciples of Christ, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Episcopalians, Hindus, Hutterites, Muslims, Jews, Lutherans, Mennonites, the Native American Church, Presbyterians, Quakers, Roman Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, and Unitarians. Seventy-five hundred Doukhobors (Spirit Wrestlers), one of two hundred sects that broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church, settled in east-central Saskatchewan in 1899.

Sports and recreation have always played a dominant role in the Great Plains. Native American games include dice, hand games, and lacrosse. Baseball, football, powwows, and rodeos are also important in the region. Three forms of football—American, Canadian, and

six-man—are associated with the Great Plains. National sports figures include Curt Gowdy, Wayne Gretzky, Phil Jackson, Ben Hogan, Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Jim Ryun, Barry Sanders, and Jim Thorpe.

Two pastimes—"riding around" and "storm chasing"—are especially revealing about the region. Riding around takes place in the evening when friends drive along country roads as a means of visiting, comforting babies, and enjoying the countryside. While riding around is a relaxing way to absorb the landscape and the dramatic vistas seen from the highway, storm chasing offers risk-takers a chance to view tornadoes at close range.

Transportation in such a vast region has always been a critical issue. Native peoples were generally nomadic and spent much of their time following herds of buffalo and trading over hundreds of miles. For centuries their only domesticated animal, the dog, carried loads and pulled travois. Heaviest loads were primarily carried by women. The introduction of horses by Spanish Conquistadors in the sixteenth century transformed Native American transportation. In the mid-1850s horses transported mail for the Pony Express from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California. Five hundred fast horses and two hundred riders made it possible for mail to be carried 1,966 miles in seven days.

Foot and pack dog trails, like the Great North Trail running from Canada to New Mexico, were developed by Plains Indians long before European American contact. During the nineteenth century trails across the Great Plains were central transportation routes for fur traders, western migrants, prospectors, soldiers, and cattlemen. In 1871 cowboys moved 700,000 cattle north from Texas grazing lands to markets and railheads in Kansas and Missouri. Especially celebrated were the Mormon, Oregon, Santa Fe, Western, Whoop-Up, and Yellowstone Trails.

The importance of these trails diminished as waterways, roadways, and railroads were established. Cars, buses, and trucks became the primary modes of transportation as roads

and highways expanded. Stretching 2,200 miles from Chicago to Los Angeles, Route 66 is the region's most famous highway, chronicled in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and celebrated in such films as *Easy Rider* and *Bagdad Café*. During the 1920s and '30s the region welcomed commercial aviation enthusiastically, and aircraft manufacturing centers for Beech Aircraft, Boeing Wichita, Cessna Aircraft, and Learjet made Wichita, Kansas, the "air capital" of the Great Plains.

Warfare has been part of the Great Plains experience for centuries. The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the massacre at Wounded Knee are etched in the American imagination. American military expansion in the region was closely associated with a sense of manifest destiny. In Canada the Red River Resistance and the North-West Rebellion found their leader in Louis Riel, the Métis visionary who occupies near-mythic status in the minds of many Canadians. American Civil War leaders who left their mark on the region included John Frémont, Philip Sheridan, and William Tecumseh Sherman. Twentieth-century military leaders include Chester Nimitz, John Pershing, and Dwight Eisenhower. The Strategic Air Command is housed near Omaha. Near Colorado Springs, looking out over the Great Plains, Cheyenne Mountain is home of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

The final chapter of the *Encyclopedia*—"Water"—is arguably its most important. The Great Plains is repeatedly threatened by both drought and floods, and entries here appropriately deal with everything from "Water Law" and "Water Quality" to "Water Towers" and "Water Transportation." Native Americans in the Plains viewed water as a spiritual force, worshiping its power. European Americans primarily view water as a resource to be tapped for economic development through irrigation and dams. Their use of groundwater began with windmills that drew limited amounts from beneath the soil. Today a single gas-powered pump can irrigate 133 acres. Such systems have tapped the Ogallala Aquifer, and in areas like

Lubbock, Texas, some farmers have pumped their way back to dryland farming.

Though early maps erroneously described the region as the “Great American Desert,” drought is a defining characteristic of the Great Plains. In 1998 alone, drought losses in Texas and Oklahoma totaled \$7.8 billion. There is a long, unsuccessful history of rainmaking in the region. In 1895 five rainmaking companies were based in Kansas. After watching one demonstration that produced thunder, wind, a few drops of rain, and a double rainbow, a local resident, Old Jules Sandoz, remarked to his neighbors, “I’ll keep catching skunks for a living.” Floods, often following cloudbursts and heavy rains or rapid ice and snow melt, also plague the region.

Each reader will surely think of entries to add to future editions of the *Encyclopedia*. I would argue for a biographical sketch of John Hope Franklin, one of America’s most distinguished historians, who was born in Oklahoma and whose father witnessed the Tulsa Race Riots. I would also argue for an entry on “mules,” since

they played a central role in settling the Great Plains. Both Josiah Gregg and General Custer preferred them to horses. Sure-footed pack animals, teams of mules pulled wagons loaded with 45,000 pounds of cargo.

Each reader will also savor a favorite nugget of information in this mother lode of Great Plains erudition. Mine is a line in the “Weeds” entry defining a weed as “a plant out of place,” for one person’s weed can be another’s salad green or wildflower.

The *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* is clearly a bone fide rainmaker for the entire region. It eloquently and lovingly captures a vast sweep of landscape and history and will excite and educate readers for generations to come. Its publication is a historic moment for all who seek a deeper understanding of North America’s history and culture.

WILLIAM FERRIS

Department of History, and the
Center for the Study of the American South
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

* * * * *