

NEBRASKA AND ITS PEOPLE

... Is This The Basis For The State's 'Timidity'?

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is another in the Nebraskan's series of stories to inform the student about the state of Nebraska. The following letter was written by Professor James Morrison, School of Journalism, in reply to a recent request. We reprint it here with his permission. This is simply his opinion on Nebraska and its people.

By JAMES MORRISON

Dear Bob:

You have asked me to set down some thoughts on Nebraska and its people. Here they are for what they are worth.

In a certain sense the bountiful state of Nebraska was created out of meagre natural resources. People of all kinds and divergent backgrounds transformed this land that had been called the "Great American Desert" into a productive garden. Even its great national forest at Halsey was hand-planted. This arduous process of creation, beset as it was by droughts, grasshopper plagues, floods, panics and depressions, developed a people that do not brag but have a quiet pride, that do not always follow the well-traveled road but seek the quieter path of their own individual destiny. Only in recent years has the Nebraskan realized that his state possesses resources that are in short supply elsewhere—a virile people, a vast underground water supply and space for living.

Formerly, Nebraska was thought of as a place to go through to get to some other place. The discouraged considered the land unfit to settle or to live on through choice. Its broad, flat expanse, unbroken by formidable natural barriers to east-west travel, has encouraged through-traffic. It has no scenery to compare with the Rockies; no exotic sights like the West Coast; no lush well-watered, flat lands like Iowa or Illinois; no deposits of minerals to speak of. Most of the people kept going to the West; or, if they became discouraged, they turned back East. This tendency to leave the state still persists.

But some stayed. Often they were the ones who could go no farther West, or, if they had turned back, could go no farther East. They often felt they were stuck in Nebraska through no fault of their own. So they settled and tried to make a go of it. Soon they discovered a marvelous thing—the soil. This land was not the rich, black loam of Iowa or Illinois; nor was it the rocky thin stuff of the East. The soil was light, porous, easily worked, and quickly drained. Later investigations proved it to be Loess—a wind-blown, volcanic ash which made a miraculous seed bed for mineral-rich crops. With water this soil could grow anything. Corn, especially, thrived during the long, searing summers.

But there was a catch. Moisture-laden air from the West was wrung dry over the Rockies and the rains from the Gulf were, more often than not, dumped before they reached Nebraska. From historic times the land between the Rockies and the Missouri had been called the "Great American Desert." It was subject to periodic waves of severe, prolonged drought and ample moisture. And these arid periods, seemingly, were just long enough and just severe enough to keep the people at a bare subsistence level. And then the rains came! Ample moisture renewed the people's hopes and native optimism; but it did not provide them with the wherewithal to pull up stakes and move out. And so Nebraskans came to believe literally in the saying, "The Lord Giveth and the Lord Taketh Away." And each Nebraskan learned through bitter experience that his own existence depended upon his own resources of mind, body, and soul. He learned the worth of individual freedom. He had to be free to marshal his forces at a moment's notice to meet either drought or abundance.

And then the railroads came. The people were encouraged. The railroads brought immigrants to settle upon the land; the iron horse carted away the surplus crops. But again, there was a catch. Most farmers had to market their crops at about the same time every year to realize money for subsistence and for the new crop. A glutted market depressed prices. And the farmers felt that railroad freight rates were confiscatory. They believed that Wall Street "interests" and Washington politicians through nefarious combinations of great wealth and political power were manipulating prices and the currency. "The Wall Street Giveth and the Wall Street Taketh Away," sayeth the farmers. And so many Nebraskans were tempted to abandon their rugged individualism. They sought security in the schemes dreamed up by Grangers, Greenbackers, and Populists. Nebraska's Bryan and his "cross of Gold" speech swept the Democratic party to power. After a time, the farmer turned back to a reliance on individualism.

And then came the automobile and the mechanization of the farm. The farmer was again encouraged by new sources of labor. But again, there was a catch. Small holdings became unprofitable and the family farm began to disappear. The farmer and his family drifted to the town and city. Villages shrank and disappeared. The depression hastened the flight of people. Once again Nebraskans turned for help to a paternal government. Under the prodding of Norris, the people were persuaded to accept public control of electric power and irrigation. But a fumbling, snail-slow bureaucracy in Washington—hundreds of miles removed from local conditions—soon changed the farmer's optimism to pessimism. "The Government Giveth and the Government Taketh Away," sayeth the farmers.

There seems to be a contradiction on everything the Nebraskan thinks and does. He is secure, yet insecure; he is conservative, yet radical; he believes in both private ownership and public ownership. In his shifting moods and attitudes, the Nebraskan is like most of the people of the great Midlands.

Robert C. O'Hara in his recent book, *Media for the Millions*, discusses these shifting moods and attitudes of the American public. In the following ten paragraphs I had adapted O'Hara's discussion to those moods and attitudes I consider characteristic of the people of the Midlands.

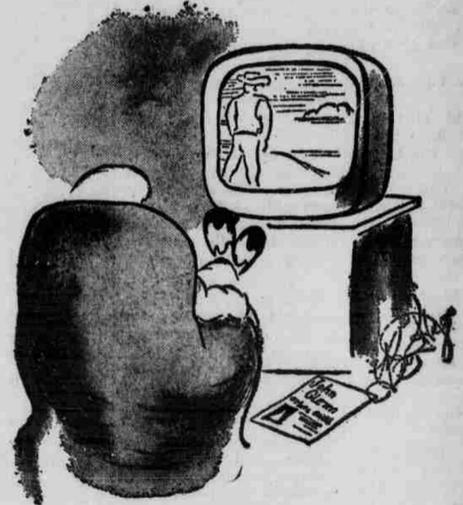
For the most part, the people of the Midlands cling to agrarian values inherited from frontier days. Such rural life placed a great premium on the effectiveness of the "family working" together as a cohesive unit. The Nebraskan valued highly the ability of the individual to conquer the land and to bend it to his will. Unfortunately, there is very little land left to conquer; nature is broken, particularly that part that can sustain a man—the soil. Increasingly, good Nebraska farms continue to erode to the sea.

In small Nebraska towns and on farms a remnant of skilled workers and craftsmen still take pride in their work; if they use machines, the tools are but extensions of the worker's skills.

Along Main Street in the Midlands, the small, privately-owned businesses still battle for the right of man to be "his own boss." Many vigorous establishments remain to underline the shared belief in the value of the individual as a shrewd bargainer.

Although shaken by the cataclysmic upheaval of two World Wars, the people of the Midlands still cling subconsciously to a belief that the middle west is isolated from the rest of the world by two vast oceans and two broad coastlines. The people continue to be preoccupied by grave concern over parochial problems and the solutions to local perplexities. Only dimly are they aware of the awful import of the missile silos in the "south forty."

Nebraskans live in the "Bible Belt." Sometimes this phrase is spoken proudly, sometimes derisively, depending on the values held dear by the speaker. Reliance on fam-



an understanding of both . . .

These contradictions in values and attitudes exhibited by the people of the Midlands are shared to some extent by Nebraskans. But he is not complacent; his environment—the great, turbulent plains—does not allow him such a luxury. A long-continuing study of the extent of social cohesiveness of the people in Nebraska towns tends to underline the Nebraskan's dilemma and the contradictions inherent in his attitudes. The research tends to show that Easterners who settled in the wholly arid portions of the West (Wyoming, for example) soon shed their Eastern ways and adapted to the new environment. Out of this interaction of people with western climate grew up a "Western" culture. Easterners who settled in the midwest—east of the Missouri River, found the climate relatively humid and stable. They found little need to change their Eastern values or habits of life. But Easterners settling in Nebraska soon found that their Eastern ways were not wholly suited to the changeable Nebraska climate, nor was the set of values of the region farther west wholly satisfactory. Nebraskans, seemingly, have not yet found a happy compromise between social living and their environment. They feel they are a part of the Midlands, yet they are apart.

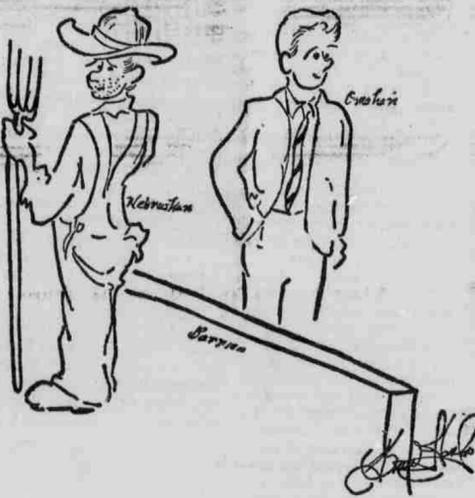
Industrialization and urbanization has touched Nebraskans. The mechanization on the farms has displaced rural folk. Families have moved to the cities and towns. As a result, most of the people are concentrated in the eastern half of the state—the highest population density being in the metropolitan area of Omaha. In some respects Nebraska appears to be divided into two main parts—Omaha and the rest of the state. Out-state folks consider Omaha a necessary place, but view it with distrust. To many rural folk it represents all those tendencies toward concentration of political power and "conspicuous consumption" which they have resisted for so long. This distrust, apparently, is not directed at Lincoln to the same degree. The capitol city seems to be more of a cross-section of rural Nebraska than Omaha. While Omaha tends to be industrial, unionized, Democratic, urban, and polyglot, Lincoln and Nebraska is open shop, Republican, rural and homogeneous.

As a rule, the Nebraskan still views the specialist and the expert askance, especially in the areas of government, education, and social life. As far as his family is concerned, the Nebraskan has long since discarded his "bailing wire" approach to the solution of problems. He now seeks advice for business problems from a C.P.A.; he has a lawyer help him with his income tax return; he turns to a medical specialist if his family's health is threatened. But he still feels, somehow, that his government and his school can be best directed by amateur "folks at home."

As a result, the Nebraskan has often been called "anti-intellectual." This self government in township and county, State and federal functions have taken over health, law enforcement, and roads. The last sizable and significant institution left under his control is his local school. Subconsciously, he recognizes the essential egalitarian nature of the compulsory attendance law, and with it he has been able to maintain through his local school some semblance of democratic social life in the community. Such curricula as business education, vocational agriculture, and vocational home economics served local purposes quite well in the past. This terminal training at the high school level was also quite adequate at a time when any high school diploma was the minimum requirement for job placement. However, the local community can no longer absorb all of its high school graduates. More and more of them go to college to compete for specialized jobs all over the world.

This fatal leeching of the most talented youth from the soil of the state rightly disturbs the Nebraskan. The people of the state cannot long maintain vigorous communities in the face of such a blood-letting. On the other hand the Nebraskan is determined to try his level best to see that bureaucrats' forces shall not drain his society of its fundamental egalitarian nature. More than that, the Nebraskan is impatient of an intellectualism that parades under the banner of democracy while fostering the dominance and control of society by an intellectual elite.

Saturday night used to be "trading" night for farmers. Tonight those farmers are at home with their attention riveted on Matt Dillon. Often called a latter-day "morality play," Gunsmoke projects those pioneer values and attributes that still hold a fascination for the Nebraskan. He yearns to be the brawny man of action, tall in the saddle and unafraid of lurking danger. He envies the men of brawn and honors the craftsman who produces things. Yet the Nebraskan knows and accepts the fact new frontiers are being blazed by men at desks and in laboratories whose marvelous productive work may have nothing to do with the fabrication of things. Colonel Glenn was alone riding in a bucking nose cone through space, but he was put there and brought down through the combined devotion of thousands of highly skilled specialists. In a basic sense Matt Dillon and Colonel Glenn are far apart in time, but each in his way is appreciated and understood by Nebraskans.



Omaha vs. Nebraska

ily fidelity, "self-reliance, frugality, and industry" as the main springs of midwestern life was largely nurtured by the Biblical tradition.

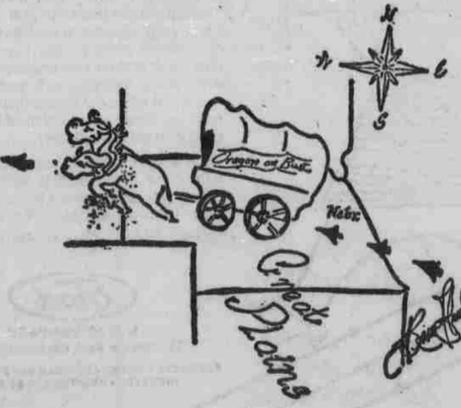
People of the Midlands cling to frontier values. These attitudes of mind and heart were the well springs for the virile action of our recent past. It grew out of a life spent in subduing a land that "lay open to the taking." To the farmer the frontier beckoned with visions of endless furrows of black, broken, prairie sod; the tradesman, the storekeeper heard the clank of the farmer's hard silver dollars in his till; the adventurer smelled the color of gold washed down from the beckoning hills. Even the Eastern industrialist was caught up in the frontier frenzy as he dreamed of the bountiful plenty pouring out of the Midlands.

What are the attitudes that still express these frontier values? First of all, the presence of an abundant and seemingly inexhaustible supply of natural resources with its tremendous "industrial potential" produced in the people an easy optimism. Each man had faith that all problems could be solved. This faith produced a facile optimism that is often expressed by the saying, "The impossible we will do tomorrow." Gradually, the realization that natural resources were no longer abundant nor inexhaustible has sobered the people. They now suspect that they must cultivate and mine the inexhaustible energies of man himself. This takes care and thought; not brawn and opportunism. And midwesterners know this subconsciously.

The people of the Midlands value independence. They believe that a man is free under the law; that the individual should be left to himself to work out his own peculiar destiny so long as his acts do not compromise the acts of others. It now dawns on the midwesterner that his individual acts increasingly do collide with the acts of others.

The people of the Midlands have a hearty "respect for ingenuity." Life on the frontier presented the pioneer with problems and emergencies that had to be faced and solved with whatever was at hand. Oftentimes, the solution was novel and unorthodox. This "bailing wire" approach to the solution of problems deepened the midwesterner's reliance on the "practical" and tended to make him contemptuous of the "educated guess" of the expert. As the midwest farm became mechanized and as farming became "big business" this attitude toward the expert has softened somewhat.

The people of the Midlands value initiative. Believing that the great Heartland of America held unlimited opportunities, midwesterners believed that the limits of success were largely unbounded and could be reached by any men with enough "get up and go." Recent developments in federal farm programs has produced a disquiet in the midwestern farmer. Basically, he feels embarrassed by being paid for "doing nothing."



... a place to go through