

# A Myth Takes Wings

by Neil Byer

Nearly everyone knows that Kansas was in a time long ago merely a stopping place for hunters, trappers, traders, Mormons, miners, and homeseekers, who thought there was really nothing worth seeking here. This was in the mid-1800's. Then came a later breed, capable of creating and perpetuating a myth. That later breed, or rather a product of its collective mind, is the substance of this issue of the *Heritage of Kansas*. In short, this is Kirke Mechem's story of the mythical Jayhawk.

Mechem's article needs little, if any, elucidation. He has told the core of the story splendidly, with the sharp eye of the historian and the careful and assuming heart and ear of a man who has lived in the mainstream of life and has consequently expanded from the experience. Any reader who has seen his original study concerning "The Story of 'Home on the Range'" or the reprint done in Volume II, Number 2 of the *Heritage* will know this to be true. And he doubtless will want only to move on to the heart of this issue, which is a facsimile reprint of Mechem's study and concentration on what is probably the state's most famous product, the Jayhawk.

But I should like to detain the reader momentarily in an attempt to provide a frame of reference for what follows.

The Jayhawk of course is a myth. And belief in myths, as we all know, is not legally obligatory. At the same time, belief in the potentially believable, the possible imaginary, the essence of fairy truth is in many ways just as much the staff of life as is bread.

One of the important functions of myth is to give value and prestige to a belief that a group of people think important. What psychological needs mythical invention fills I would not try to answer. I would only speculate. Here we were in Kansas. We were a people with deep desires, the same as those of all men everywhere—we were at once fearful, and hopeful, and passionate; we were sentimental and vigorous and already tired and we were trying hard to impose an order on a way of life which was largely without order. We needed a new belief to accompany the new life; we needed a vortex around which the unaccustomed winds of life might whirl; we needed an anchor. We gave birth to a Jayhawk.

The notes in the facsimile indicate in a general way the widespread nature of the acceptance accorded "The Mythical Jayhawk." But the nature of its acceptance, I think, is made a bit clearer in some of the correspondence to the Kansas Historical Society which resulted from the various editions. I therefore have appended what I hope will be an interesting sampling of the response. I am, of course, beholden to the author for this material as well as for the privilege of reprinting his work.

Interestingly enough, in this connection, a young friend of mine, Patti Wright, of Topeka, read the Mechem study this summer. Now Miss

Wright is a poet of no mean skill; she had already shown me two beautiful, sensuous, sensitive poems, one of the meadowlark

*. . . A tiny bird, in one climactic note,  
Sang more of truth than I can ever know.*

and one of the sunflower

*. . . Bronze centers catch on fire from setting sun  
And mingle cheering light with prairie green  
In golden echoes of an autumn dawn  
That live in quiet fields and bloom unseen.*

Well, at my request, she wrote to be included here what follows. Capturing in any normal poetic sense that raucous old bird you'll be reading about would give anyone pause. Here is what Miss Wright produced; she thinks it is bad. I think it is good fun, yet serious, and deserves to be read.

*In a vastness of heritage all of us live  
Among legends both many and great,  
But none is as bold as the one of the bird  
That made Kansas the Jayhawker state.*

*Perhaps he was born at Quantrill's raid  
Like a phoenix arising from flame  
Or was hatched from the egg of a thunderbird  
And given an Indian name.*

*While men of great intellect argue still  
About whether or not he has foes,  
They agree that his feathers are crimson and blue.  
But it's only the Jayhawk who knows.*

*Though the emblems of Kansas are tangible things—  
A flower, a bird, and a tree,  
With one wing the immortal, invisible bird  
In his myth can encompass all three.  
He can change shades, fly backwards and not lose his way,  
And infinitely vary his role;  
With unquestioning courage the Jayhawk goes on  
Fulfilling his mythical goal.*

*So reduced to a legend, the Jayhawk persists  
In forcing some Kansans to see  
That their symbol, pursuing his flight to the stars,  
Can be all that men want him to be.*

*Le voila.* Still the great red and blue and yellow bird sails unmolested and supreme through Kansas skies. He is a king there, yet he is there by our sufferance. And at the same time we are here by his.

Anyway, here you have "The Mythical Jayhawk." Dream—or is it vision?—and courage of dream.