

Men Against the Frontier

by
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Coronado was a stranger in a timeless land. And the land was Kansas. He left behind him a few horses, a band of sheep, and his own incoherent dreams. So he trailed back southward whence he came, broken on the rack of the Quiviran myth, unequal in concept to the Quiviran reality; he followed his rainbow to the end, but alas! no pot of gold.

Since then—1541—the story of Kansas and Kansans has been telling itself. Boundaries have been drawn, claims staked, Indians displaced, buffaloes slaughtered, and wagon trails hewn through a prairie ocean. The very trails have turned to tracks of steel, blood has been let in a war of politics, and emigrant trains and settlers and wheat have followed heroic, and withal remunerative, cattle drives. In sum, the tireless tale has been written of the building of a plains empire—of men against the frontier.

And we have at hand now the Quiviran reality. For the essence of the past is the spirit of the present—in art, in literature, in legend, lore, and custom, in history, in culture, and, significant above all, in human lives. Man must work his way backward through time to his spiritual roots, his heritage, if he would understand what in reality he is. And what man would not know that. What Kansan could fail of wanting Coronado's dream to unfold in his best heart.

It is insufficient to be knowledgeable in state history. It is unsatisfactory only to know facts. Certainly the facts are important. To know, for example, the story of the cowboy, doubtless the front-runner of American culture heroes, is undeniably a bit of significant and useful patriotic knowledge. Or to know about the cowboy's natural adjunct, the Kansas cowtown of pseudo-myth and legend and reality—Abilene, Ellsworth, Newton, and Dodge City, unique in all the world. But beyond such essential history there is necessary a revival of regional sentiment which will lead past facts to evaluation. For facts have a way of not seeming final, unless as symbols of people and events long dead. It is rather the mystery and romance evoked by facts which give the latter their real value and, in truth, recall them from the grave. Knowledge of Kansas, then, lies in the valley of facts, understanding of Kansas somewhere on the hill of imagination beyond. Surely understanding is the more to be cherished: one must listen with the heart.

A study of Kansas may begin almost anywhere, for all Kansans rubbed shoulders and all events here seemed to unfold, singly or in groups, as if at the pull of strings by some master puppeteer. Historically, however,

there is reason to weave the story of the state around the figure of the pioneer. Everyone recognizes him in the lines that follow:

My name is Frank Bolar, 'nole bachelor I am,
I'm keepin' ole bach on an elegant plan.
You'll find me out West in the County of Lane
Starving to death on a government claim;
My house it is built of the national soil,
The walls are erected according to Hoyle,
The roof has no pitch but is level and plain
And I always get wet when it happens to rain.

*But hurrah for Lane County, the land of the free,
The home of the grasshopper, bedbug and flea,
I'll sing loud her praises and boast of her fame
While starving to death on my government claim.*

My clothes they are ragged, my language is rough,
My head is case-hardened both solid and tough;
The dough it is scattered all over the room
And the floor would get scared at the sight of a broom;
My dishes are dirty and some in the bed
Covered with sorghum and government bread;
But I have a good time, and live at my ease
On common sop-sorghum, old bacon and grease.

*But hurrah for Lane County, the land of the West,
Where the farmers and laborers are always at rest,
Where've you've nothing to do but sweetly remain,
And starve like a man on your government claim.*

How happy I am when I crawl into bed,
And a rattlesnake rattles his tail at my head,
And the gay little centipede, void of all fear,
Crawls over my pillow and into my ear,
And the nice little bedbug so cheerful and bright,
Keeps me a-scratching full half of the night,
And the gay little flea with toes sharp as a tack
Plays "why don't you catch me?" all over my back.

*But hurrah for Lane County, where blizzards arise,
Where the winds never cease and the flea never dies,
Where the sun is so hot if there you remain
'Twill burn you quite black on your government claim.*

How happy I am on my government claim,
Where I've nothing to lose and nothing to gain,

Nothing to eat and nothing to wear,
Nothing from nothing is honest and square.
But here I am stuck, and here I must stay,
My money's all gone and I can't get away;
There's nothing will make a man hard and profane
Like starving to death on a government claim.

*Then come to Lane County, there's room for you all,
Where the winds never cease and the rains never fall,
Come join in her chorus and boast of her fame,
While starving to death on your government claim.*

Now don't get discouraged, ye poor hungry men,
We're all here as free as a pig in a pen;
Just stick to your homestead and battle your fleas,
And pray to your Maker to send you a breeze.
Now a word to claim-holders who are bound for to stay:
You may chew your hard-tack till you're toothless and gray,
But as for me, I'll no longer remain
And starve like a dog on my government claim.

*Farewell to Lane County, farewell to the West,
I'll travel back East to the girl I love best;
I'll stop in Missouri and get me a wife,
And live on corn dodgers the rest of my life.**

Humorous though it may be, with its sarcasm and satire but scantily clothed, the song of Frank Bolar is one which sings the truth of many a homesteader; it is this truth which gives the Kansas pioneer a centrality in his state's history, the proportions of a hero, if you will. Certain facts about him remain incontrovertible: he was a man who came here to farmstead, to live from the soil. He soon realized that his was a constant struggle of man against man and man against nature. His struggle continued in sharp clarity for half a century, for the Kansas frontier was fifty years moving across the state; and long after the eastern half of Kansas was a settled community, the peoples of western Kansas were undergoing the hardships of pioneer life. Drouths, floods, blizzards, grasshoppers, booms, and Indians—each of these exacted an immense toll which resulted largely from men living in an environment in which they had little means of protecting themselves. The first drouth, in 1859-60, of which an account follows, was the worst one; a third of the people did not have

* This version of the ballad, "Starving To Death On My National Claim," is reprinted from Tremaine McDowell's *America in Literature*. He lists no author. A number of variants exist. In his book, *The Kaw*, Floyd Benjamin Streeter presents evidence that it was composed in 1887 by Frank Baker "on his homestead near the Ness County line." (See p. 209.) In the Streeter version Baker supplants Bolar. See also *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, collected by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, pp. 407-408. McDowell's version was used for its fullness and representative character.

the means to get away; those who could, left. Then followed the frontier Indian Wars, during which a thousand settlers lost their lives in a five-year period, and during which the line of settlement was pushed eastward, not westward, and all travel across the overland trails ceased.

But Indians and depredations of nature soon became old hat to some of the pioneers. And they chose to scoff at Frank Bolar's final philosophy. Their faith in this new land was justified; they were learning the Quiviran reality. Kansas nurtured a full-grown boom which ended in 1887 with a first-class bust. But then in a few years the East, with its capital, was again thinking about Kansas.

The selections which follow in this number have a general chronological sequence. The major boundaries are those of the drouth cycle, 1860-1887. The first and third are historical narratives; the other two are fictionalized history. The drouth of 1860 is the subject matter of the initial piece and a later drouth forms the theme of the last. The other two treat, respectively, of the exuberance of Kansas promoters and of emigrant life in Kansas.

J. N. Holloway, a native of Indiana, wrote "The Drouth of 1860." Holloway came to Kansas in 1866. He first taught school in Ottawa, but soon moved to Topeka, where he wrote the first history of the state following its admission to the Union. To bring out the history, he spent all his savings, mortgaged his property, and borrowed money from relatives and friends. Following publication he traveled over eastern Kansas by horse and buggy—camping out, sleeping in the buggy, and doing his own cooking—selling the history and appointing agents. Returning to the East, he found the sales disappointing, and to discharge the debt he had incurred, he practised law and taught school.

"At Kawsmouth Station," by Henry King and "Emigrant Life in Kansas," by Percy Ebbutt have something in common which distinguishes them from most writings about pioneer life in Kansas—they are tinged with joy and humor, and the latter especially indicates that life sparkled for its author.

King came here from Ohio following the Civil War, in which he had been a captain. He was associated with Topeka newspapers for more than a decade. During these years he wrote local-color short stories for the leading American magazines. In the 1880's he left Kansas for the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, which he edited for many years.

Ebbutt came from his native England at the age of ten. He remained in Kansas six years, and after his return to England published a book relating his experiences for the benefit of countrymen who wanted to know about life on the prairies.

William Allen White is the last author represented, a short story, "The Story of Aqua Pura," being included. White hardly need be intro-

duced. Newspaper man and author for many years, he built a world-wide reputation for himself and for his newspaper, the *Emporia Gazette*.

Whatever the intrinsic worth of these articles, and certainly it varies from one to another of them, one point surely stands in bold relief. If the whole truth of them be accepted, they are explanatory or partially explanatory of Kansas—factual signposts pointing to the past which stretches out so far behind us that only the mind's eye can see it and only the heart comprehend it. They are facts which give the hard core of truth and beauty to Coronado's dream.

Remembrances, associations, happenings—these are evoked: the willful wave of the sunflower in a Kansas dry wind . . . the reconstructed image of the hump-backed buffalo, herding with his millions of fellows . . . the arid song of the meadowlark, celebrating the arid history of his adopted habitat . . . flies settling thick, swarming the doorway, a certain signal that rain will come . . . then country roads turned rivulets . . . sitting under the night sky, searching out your star . . . or resting quietly at afternoon or evening, watching the sun's rays or the moon's rays falter through the windowpane and scatter on the floor . . . tall, gaunt, naked trees daring the cold and furrowing blasts of winter shuttling in all their Kansas vigor across the Kansas prairie which is still a frontier, black trees standing sentry on the dark: silent hope for the moment, quintessence of the grand dream, spirit that persists. *Ad astra per aspera*.

And the recollection of the pioneer, the portrait of the half-beaten, anxious face of the farmer awaiting the magical elixir, precious rain. He needs to be recalled. For, finally, he built Kansas. A product of the soil, he worked it and proudly begged a living from it; amongst reverses, he bent it to his will. He made the frontier, then re-made it; when the compromise was drawn, he laid down the terms. He needs to be recalled. For he is the symbol of the jumbled past which spawned the Kansas of today. He is the Quiviran truth. He represents the spiritual earth in which Kansas has its roots—and these roots are the heritage of Kansas.