

# *Megalophilia In Kansas Folklore*

by  
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**T**he American Great Plains is a physiographic region in the United States which exhibits considerable physical and economical coherence, but which defies precise delineation. Although considerable debate has been associated with the location of its eastern physical margins, geographers have tended to accept Nevin M. Fenneman's 1914 conclusion that the Great Plains was a physically identifiable region in the United States and that "the name Great Plains is so firmly attached to this region by custom that it must be retained."<sup>1</sup> Whether you accept one system of boundaries or another, parts of Kansas have been included as part of every Great Plains region proposed. As a Kansas geographer I can recognize the physical and corresponding economic differences between eastern and western Kansas, but I have difficulty in recognizing the cultural differences in Kansas which many studies of the Great Plains region propose are unique to the region. The purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility that folklore might be a useful tool to delineate a cultural boundary between the Great Plains and Central Lowland regions in Kansas.

The problems of defining physiographic subdivisions is complicated in any region, but it is particularly difficult in plains states where impressive local relief among the landforms is missing. Nevin Fenneman, in his classic study of the physiography of the western United States, developed a boundary of the Plains border which roughly cuts across the Cretaceous system in the outcrops of the Dakota formation of the Smoky Hills, across the Great Bend Prairie in central Kansas, and across the escarpments of the Red Hills in southern Kansas.<sup>2</sup> Fenneman's observations in 1931, contradicted the work of George I. Adams who in 1903 published a map of the physical features which is very much like the one used today by the State Geological Survey and which made the crests of the Flint Hills uplands the boundary between the Central Lowlands and the Great

Plains.<sup>3</sup> The work of Adams was largely reaffirmed by John C. Frye and Ada Swineford in 1949, in the *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science*.<sup>4</sup> Not only did they accept the Flint Hills margin between the Great Plains and Central Lowlands, they also accepted, with minor modifications, the major subdivisions proposed by Adams.

We must recognize the inherent difficulties in drawing exact regional boundaries in a world where broad zones of transition are more often observed in the field. When confronted with a problem of indistinct topographical landforms upon which to make decisions, geographers have tended to look for reinforcing data as indicators of change. Historical and cultural data have been considered in some of these cases.

It is fascinating to consider the historical geography of the Great Plains region where such contradictory information about its potential usefulness was publicized to the nation. Prior to the Civil War, westward migration passed over the region because its climate was believed to be too hostile and its topography too barren to support a productive economy. This was the "Great American Desert," better left to the Indian and buffalo. As travelers traversed the Great Plains enroute to more fertile lands in the Far West, they became aware that the land was not desert-like. The American perception of the Great Plains gradually changed and by 1854, the Plains had become part of the typical interior frontier. Railroad brochures extolled the "Plains" virtues as William Gilpin's "pastoral gardens of the World."<sup>5</sup>

The desert image was an exaggeration, but probably not much more of an exaggeration than the garden image which replaced it. Wagons rolling eastward out of Kansas during the 1861 drouth were observed to carry signs, "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted." The Great Plains has been ealled a crucible which moulded and formed the character of its inhabitants. The cultural geographer is interested in the uniqueness of the social condition which resulted from the human-environmental confrontation. The difficulty is in trying to identify or to test for the unique cultural response and to define its limits or boundary.

As early as 1931, Walter Prescott Webb, reported that the Great Plains cultural environment extended far outside its regional borders.<sup>6</sup> It is doubtful today whether any part of Kansas can be described as unique in terms of its people and values. Its central location and the settlement history of migrants from eastern states and foreign lands have tended to make it, if not a melting pot, at

least a miniature replica of the larger whole. Ethnic migrators and established American settlers from eastern states can be found in both eastern and western locations. The historian, Carl Becker, wrote in 1910, the year Kansas recorded the largest number of foreign born residents, that

the Kansas spirit is the American spirit double distilled. It is a new, grafted product of American individualism, American idealism, American intolerance. Kansas is America in microcosm. . . .<sup>7</sup>

No study of the Kansas culture could exclude the Turner thesis first advanced in 1893. Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed that the central fact of American existence has been the experience of the advancing settlement frontier and its affect on the rest of the country and later generations. Turner maintained that the American national character was forged on the frontier and the meaning of American history can be understood only in the light of the peculiar social, economic and psychological conditions of the Frontier.<sup>8</sup> Although it is highly improbable that historical evidence can ever be put together to substantiate the Turner thesis about the influence of the frontier on the whole of American culture, there is reason to believe that the culture of Kansas represents important frontier influences and that the Great Plains was one of the last American frontiers. The frontier influence in Kansas was not exclusively a Great Plains phenomenon. Kansas was settled from the east to the west after the Kansas Territory was established in 1854. All parts of Kansas had further settlements between 1854 and 1890.

Donald O. Cowgill, in an article entitled, "Cultural Values in Kansas," identified nine dominant cultural values which are a combination of typically American values and those which might be associated with a frontier influence or some combining of both.<sup>9</sup> Among those frontier values or traits might be listed the willingness to gamble for large stakes, and the ability to endure hardships with not only resignation, but also good humor. The geographic problem in the list is trying to determine if there is a regional distinction among the cultural values. Other lists of traits or Great Plains characteristics behaviors can be identified from the literature. Carl Fredrick Kraenzel in the *Great Plains in Transition* lists the creation of necessary reserves, the introduction of flexibility into social operations, and the acquisition of mobility as necessary for a social system to survive in the Great Plains.<sup>10</sup> E. Cotton Mather in *Regions of the United States*, "The American Great Plains" wrote that certain cultural traits have persisted since early settlement and are prominent throughout the region. They are the romantic aura of the

cowboy, the transit character of the region, and its preoccupation with bigness or cultural megalophilia.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Saarinen in *Perception of the Drouth Hazard on the Great Plains* identifies certain personality traits which characterize Great Plains wheat farmers. They include the theme of personal determination, humor related to the dust and drouth, and the attitude of personal helplessness in the face of environmental hazards.<sup>12</sup>

Because there has been little research on the Great Plains in Kansas as a culture region beyond attempts to theorize about social phenomena, it seemed logical to explore an historical-cultural approach to find a way to verify commonly advanced notions or observations about Great Plains cultural characteristics. In cultural geography the limits or boundaries of a cultural characteristic have been studied through the examination of house types, field patterns, language distributions, religious distributions, population distributions, and even folk tales. Joan Walker Miller's study of the Ozark Region in the *Annals* of the Association of American Geographers, demonstrated the possibilities and contribution of traditional materials to the understanding of a geographic region.<sup>13</sup> Although Carl Sauer once referred to this kind of research as one of the "lesser lines of historical field work,"<sup>14</sup> it seemed like a reasonable approach because to produce folklore there must be a people who have preserved a common culture in geographic and occupational isolation to develop a distinctive expression of fantasy. The tales produced are supposed to reflect imaginative reactions to the material conditions of their lives if there is sufficient separation from neighboring peoples by barriers of language, national heritage, occupations, geographic conditions, or any combination of these factors.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, I chose to develop a pilot study to test Kansas folklore as a potential data base for gaining additional understanding of the culture of Kansas. Examination of folklore materials caused me to note that folklorists are systematic in their collection of data, usually noting the location and date of items collected.

Two of the cultural values or traits found in the literature cited seemed to lend themselves to this kind of inquiry. One was the humor related to dust and drouth and the other the preoccupation with bigness or cultural megalophilia. Drouth in Kansas influences all parts of the state and would not likely have a boundary, so I chose to hypothesize that megalophilia would likely be concentrated in the traditional patterns as an oral transmission in the Great Plains region of Kansas. In order to support this premise, I examined the published collections of some of the foremost Kansas folklorists,

Samuel Sackett, William Koch, and P.J. Wyatt and researched newspapers and historical collections for Kansas anecdotes which might illustrate megalophilia.

The folklore is part of a fictional world, a never-never land of make-believe and is passed along in the oral tradition of a people. The two most completely developed tall tales in Kansas concern Jim Kansan and Johnny Kaw. Jim Kansan who was so large he ate a tub of oatmeal and a slab of sow-belly and drank a gallon of milk every morning for breakfast, was the apparent creation of K. O. Epsing, superintendent of schools at Council Grove.<sup>16</sup> Johnny Kaw, who started each day with four cubic yards of pancakes covered with a gallon of good sorghum molasses washed down with a half-boiler of black coffee, was the Manhattan giant created by George Filinger.<sup>17</sup> A statue of Johnny Kaw has been erected in the Manhattan City park. Both of these tall tales emerged on the margins of the Flint Hills, but unfortunately neither character probably existed in the oral tradition of the Kansas people. The stories surrounding both characters would qualify as poplore or fakelore by folklorist Richard Dorson's standards.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the stories of Johnny Kaw were written as part of the Manhattan Centennial celebration and are distributed by the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce,<sup>19</sup> and that the Jim Kansan stories extol the tourist attractions of Historic Council Grove attest to the commercial, not traditional origin of the stories. Their appearance in the 1950's are reminiscent of the Paul Bunyon stories created by William B. Loughead around 1910 as an advertisement for the Red River Lumber Company,<sup>20</sup> and the Nebraska giant Febold Feboldson, conjured up by Nebraskan Wayne Carrol for his lumber company in 1923.<sup>21</sup> It would not be possible to determine the persistent existence of megalophilia on the Great Plains from any of these stories. That leaves many less grandiose folktales upon which to base our judgement.

One of the best examples of the exaggeration of distance or size in Kansas folklore was collected by P.J. Wyatt in Waubanssee County (which is not in the Great Plains). It is a story of a conversation between a man and his uncle about clear skies and seeing a great distance in Kansas. The uncle could see a fly crawlin' around on the Capitol dome twenty-five miles away. But his nephew who couldn't see it knew it was there because he could hear it crawlin'.<sup>22</sup> From Lane County in western Kansas there is an Ole Olson story about the biggest strawstack in the world. Ole says in the story, ". . . I sure like Western Kansas, because everything's so big out here. I feel kind of big myself."<sup>23</sup> Other stories involving distance and size

related to the width and depth of cracks in the ground during a drouth. Frances Normandin collected a typical story about a dog which fell into one such crack and couldn't get out. A sixteen foot chain was let down into the crack to help retrieve the dog but was dropped by mistake. The next morning the chain could still be heard rattling and jangling as it fell.<sup>24</sup> These stories and others like them illustrate megalophilia but do not occur in large enough numbers in the literature nor exclusively in the Great Plains culture region. They are inconclusive.

A large number of size exaggerated stories had to do with the growth of crops, particularly corn. Corn was Kansas' major crop and was grown widely across the state in the early decades following statehood. But since corn was a statewide crop, particularly adapted to the more humid eastern plains, it is not possible to link all these stories to the Great Plains or to use them to delineate a boundary. One corn folktale collected in the *Kansas Federal Writers Project* tells of the enormous corn stalks which, of course, were grown on extremely large fields. The story tells of one man whose field was so wide that by the time the mortgage was recorded on the west side, the mortgage on the east side had come due. The hired man and hired girl, following their wedding, went out to milk the cows that grazed on the west side. When they returned they had a child one year old. This story does illustrate megalophilia and raising corn.<sup>25</sup>

Of even more interest is the paucity of exaggerated folktales about wheat. One such story, reported in *Kansas Folklore*, originated in Caldwell and describes wheat so plump that one kernel would make a loaf of bread.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, I found no wheat folktales which were collected in eastern Kansas, but unfortunately there were not enough wheat folktales altogether to draw a conclusion about their geographical importance. This illustrates one of the difficulties of using folklore for research purposes. Does the researcher count the number of folktales to determine significance or does one evaluate the quality of the folktale—its source and originality.

There were a large number of tall sunflower tales and pumpkin tales, but the location of the folktales were rarely given. They provided no insight into the problem of delineating the Great Plains boundary.

There are many folktales in Kansas which refer to the dimensions of climatological phenomena. Big winds, great cyclones, large hailstones, blinding duststorms, and great blizzards are frequent themes in Kansas folklore. The years 1873-1877 were known for the grasshopper infestation. Legend has it the cowboys saddled the

larger grasshoppers for ponies. The folktales which were inspired by these hardships are more related to the humor which enables people to endure hardships than cultural megalophilia. The early settlers loved a good story—or a lie for its own sake. Perhaps even more important, by exaggerating the hardships they endured and the calamities that befell them, they were able, paradoxically enough, to cut them down to size.

The folklore of Kansas tells much about the human condition as people attempted to adapt to the land and climate. It does not provide much assistance in defining the Great Plains—Central Lowlands boundary. Megalophilia, however, is a recurring theme in Kansas folklore. The very nature of the oral transmission of folktales in an area known for its mobility and transit propensities may cause the diffusion of the folktales beyond their original boundaries and lessen the probabilities that they will represent a unique cultural characteristic of a specific region. This might be a fruitful direction for additional research on this topic.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nevin M. Fenneman, "Physiographic Regions of the United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 4, (1914), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Nevin M. Fenneman, *Physiography of the Western United States*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc. 1931), pp. 27-28.

<sup>3</sup>George I. Adams, "Physiographic Divisions of Kansas," *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science*, 18, (1903), pp. 117-119.

<sup>4</sup>John C. Frye and Ada Swineford, "The Plains Border Physiographic Section," *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science*, 64, (1949), pp. 71-81.

<sup>5</sup>William Gilpin, *The Central Gold Region*, (Philadelphia: Sower, Barnes and Company, 1860), p. 120.

<sup>6</sup>Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1931), pp. 3-9.

<sup>7</sup>Carl J. Becker, "Kansas," in *Essays in American History Dedicated to Fredrick Jackson Turner*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910), p. 91.

<sup>8</sup>Fredrick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier Section, Selected Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961), p. 61.

<sup>9</sup>Donald O. Cowgill, "Cultural Values in Kansas," *University of Wichita Bulletin*, 36, May, (1961), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Carl Fredrick Kraenzel, *The Great Plains In Transition*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), pp. 324-346.

<sup>11</sup>E. Cotton Mather, "The American Great Plains," in *Regions of the United States*, John Foster Hart, ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 237

<sup>12</sup>Thomas F. Saarinen. *Perception of the Drouth Hazard on the Great Plains*. (Chicago: University of Chicago. Department of Geography, Research Paper no. 106. 1966). pp. 104-137.

<sup>13</sup>E. Joan Wilson Muller. "The Ozark Region as Revealed by Traditional Materials," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 58, (1968). pp. 51-57.

<sup>14</sup>Carl O. Sauer. "Forward to Historical Geography," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*. 51. (1941), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>Martha Warren Becker. *Folklore in America*. (Poughkeepsie: Vassar College, The Folklore Foundation, 1931), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>K. O. Epsing. "The Adventures of Jim Kansan," *Kansas Teacher*. (November, 1953), pp. 12-13, 28-29 See also the *Council Grove Republican*, January 28, 1954.

<sup>17</sup>"Kansas Realm Had a Grant, Too," *Kansas City Star*, November 7, 1954. See also *Lawrence Journal World*, May 6, 1954.

<sup>18</sup>Richard M. Dorson. *Folklore and Fakelore*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) p. 9.

<sup>19</sup>George A. Filinger. *The Story of Johnny Kaw*, (Manhattan: Ag Press, 1955), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup>Dorson, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup>Louise Pound. *Nebraska Folklore*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), pp. 122-126.

<sup>22</sup>P. J. Wyatt. *I'm Not Selling Anything, Some Folklore from Kansas*, Master's Thesis. (Bloomington: Indiana Univeristy Press, August, 1956), p. 34.

<sup>23</sup>S. J. Sackett and William E. Koch. *Kansas Folklore*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 101.

<sup>24</sup>P. J. Wyatt. "So Called Tall Tales about Kansas," *Western Folklore*, 22, (1963), p. 108.

<sup>25</sup>*Kansas. A Guide to the Sunflower State*, (New York: Hastings House, 1939), p. 108.

<sup>26</sup>Sackett, *op. cit.*, *Kansas Folklore*, p. 19 An explanation for the lack of wheat folk stories might be related to the fact that wheat didn't become the principle crop in Kansas until the 20th century.