

## WHAT HAPPENED TO KANSAS?

by

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From time to time, paid "authorities," national humorists, native champions, visiting firemen, and those who simply love the state have taken up pen or typewriter to tell the world what happened to Kansas. Most admit to being considerably mystified by that "geographical expression" and its fate. Words like "dilemma," "ambivalence," "divergent," "strange," and "dichotomy" crop up with predictable frequency. Natives who are exposed to this rhetoric are grateful no one has as yet put a finger on the precise pulse or cleared the air of all mystery. They enjoy the effort, doubt the conclusions, and generally keep their own counsel.

A sampling of five commentaries from the vast array available are offered here in chronological order as being either typical, notorious, or somewhat close to the mark.

The first to attract national attention was William Allen White's now famous, or infamous, editorial of 1896. For White there was no mystery. He knew what the trouble was. Kansas was being made to look the fool by a crop of "shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained fanatics" and lecturing "harpies . . . telling people that Kansas is raising Hell and letting the corn go to weeds . . . ." This was not an analytical essay; it was a political tirade written in a fit of peevish pique during the height of the McKinley-Bryan campaign. Yet, his name-calling of the Populist opposition (who were clobbering the established Republicans at the local polls), fastened an image on Kansas that has been as tenacious as that of the Wizard of Oz, lasting because the editorial was widely circulated, cleverly written, and sounded like what a hick state ought to be.

In calmer moments, White exulted in the excellence of Kansas village life and reflected the true Progressive fear that this utopia might be subverted by industrialism and economic centralization. The public never remembered that side of the Emporia oracle. Who knows anyone who has read In the Heart of a Fool or A Certain Rich Man?

The most unlikely spokesman for Kansas was a benign Mount Oread college professor, who helped establish his reputation with a whimsical, literary apology for being in Kansas in the first place. Why, Carl L. Becker asks, as an intellectual Eastern observer, would anyone riding a train between Kansas City and Lawrence look out the window at the sunflowers and say with great feeling, "Dear old Kansas!"? It was for him a profound mystery, resolved only when he discovered Kansas roots reached deep into his own Puritan New England. Even then, he found Kansans very different from the people back East. Kansans were idealistic, peculiar, distinctive, and individualistic, although marked by "a certain uniformity . . . much after the same pattern." Clearly,

Becker was having difficulty coming to grips with the strange folk on the prairies.

He did find many positive attributes. The Kansas pilgrims were blessed by an "instinct to endure" and to joke about the endurance. He marveled at their enthusiasm and their assumption that, destined to succeed, they had the right and obligation to point the way--the morally correct way--to less fortunate people. What saved this self-righteousness from becoming disastrous dogma was an abiding "passion for equality." It was a prideful virtue a New Englander could respect. Although Becker saw Kansans devoted to certain high ideals, as well as concrete principles, what made Kansans different was their being "in touch with a certain cosmic process," not something inherent in the land, but rather, a unique "state of mind."

Since Becker served the state far better than its own journalists, Kansas has frequently called in other outsiders to sort things out and tell the state where it's going. In 1954, Allan Nevins, a New York journalist turned historian, was invited to do the job for the Kansas Centennial Conference and presented several cogent, sometimes tendentious observations to mark the occasion. He found much to praise in the early, pioneer experience, from the bloody days of John Brown through the frenzied era of "Sockless" Jerry Simpson. Those early fighters and Populist hell-raisers did much to preserve liberalism and individual freedoms. In those days, Kansas had been "a cutting force" in the American system.

Now (that is, 1954), after a hundred years, new dilemmas faced the state. The crucial challenge for Kansas, as for the nation, was to preserve the "ancient freedoms while pursuing the inexorable path of consolidation and centralization" under an expanding "militarism." In all honesty, Nevins wasn't very hopeful that the state, which had offered so many solutions early on, was still up to the job. Nevins found that Kansas had become over the years neglectful of the arts and culture, "relatively uneducated, unread, untravelled, and largely unaware of historic fact or current world trends." Kansans simply weren't qualified any longer to point the way.

More recently (1976) an expatriate voiced some of the same concerns over Kansas' diminished capacities. Kenneth S. Davis wrote of the discontent rekindled by the ambivalent emotions he experienced on returning to his home state after an absence of fifteen years. Once he crossed the border into Kansas, he experienced a ". . . sense of relinkage with a particular vitally significant space . . . a sense of renewing acquaintance with a distinct personality about whom I deeply cared . . . and as our tour continued, this sense, this generalized emotion, was increasingly permeated by those powerful ambivalences of pride-and-disgust, pleasure-and-exasperation, even passionate love-and-hate, which Kansas used to arouse or provoke in men when I lived within the borders." What perturbed Davis most was his awareness of rich promise unfulfilled--the Puritan conviction turned to petty prohibition, the Populist leadership no longer in the vanguard of social progress, and civic idealism soured into unmitigated self-righteousness." He was dismayed to find "the two most

publicized issues before the legislature . . . were 'bingo' and liquor," an irritation shared by many Kansans.

An even more recent evaluation, by Neal R. Pierce and Jerry Hagstrom, echoed the Davis lament. They found Kansas an "eclipsed state" living "in the shadows," with its old "national role . . . diminished." "Indeed," they wrote, "nowhere on the American continent can the eclipse of a region or state as a vital force--a focal point of creative change or exemplar of national life--be felt so strongly and poignantly as in Kansas." They quote a contemporary professor at Kansas University, less benign than Becker, who suggested that Kansas ought to be declared "a national monument, the best source of quality human talent--most of it for export." What is left, apparently, is the flat, mediocre center of the nation. "Take any measure of government policy and performance--from taxation to services, highways to education--and Kansas will rank midway in the fifty states."

The rest of the Pierce-Hagstrom piece was given over to a listing of Kansas assets. Many were found quite tarnished--such as an agricultural economy blossoming in the old Dust Bowl, but threatened by inflation, poor markets, and a depleted Ogallala Aquifer; and the two largest municipalities--well-managed but suffering from racial discords. Other resources could be bragged about in the old-fashioned Becker manner--aerospace plants, federal and military prisons, oil and gas wells and plants, Truman Capote's In Cold Blood, marijuana harvests, and "the largest area of essentially untouched prairie anywhere on the continent." Of all these good things, they judged the "amazing" Menninger Foundation to be the greatest.

You can tell the authors were trying to be kind to the old state. It's the sort of condescending kindness Kansans have grown accustomed to ever since Dorothy flew off on the typical, calm tornadic day.

All five essayists agree it's been a glorious past. Kooky sometimes--but entertaining, loveable, and productive. Nevins, who was especially enamored of those early fighters, was also aware that Kansas had toyed with "every incoherent and fantastic dream of social improvement and reform, every economic delusion that has bewildered the foggy brain of fanatics, every political fallacy nurtured by the misfortune of poverty and failure, rejected elsewhere . . ." There were two sides to the Kansas coin, he discovered. "If the reformer grew passionate, so did the conservative." The good ol' days were certainly a mixed bag.

Davis, who was nearest to understanding the Kansas psyche agreed that Kansans always represented ambivalence. There is no coaxing uniformity of value out of the complexities of Kansas emotions and convictions. Kansans are rarely of one mind. For every virtue, there's a favored vice, for every asset, a lateral liability.

Why Kansans were, and perhaps still are, a unique bundle of recognizable contradictions has been hard to understand. Davis spent considerable time discussing the weather and the

land, and their psychological influence on Kansas' conception of life and how to live it. "When the environed is a living entity, the environment is actively internalized, becoming part and parcel of the individualized psyche . . ." Such profound rationalization of uniqueness and territorial personification leads to many questions. Was the loneliness of the prairies of Kansas different from the isolation of North Dakota? Were Kansas grasshoppers larger and more gluttonous than Nebraska's? Is there anything in Commanche county terrain that resembles Finney or Johnson counties? It is not the Kansan's understanding of his environment rather than the land itself that colors their comprehension of the state?

Although each essayist was writing from his own point of time and experience, all found the passing of time had altered Kansas from the early-day freaks and fighters, and not for the better. What they are really complaining about is lost youth and the coming of maturity.

And it's true that it's harder to get a good bond scandal worked up these days because of the sophisticated government checks. It's also true Nancy Kassebaum is following a different track than Carry Nation, and doesn't grab as many national headlines. Most Kansans are pretty happy about that. Bob Dole's national leadership certainly equals William Peffer's and his oneline sarcasms are about as pungent as Yellin' Ellen Lease'e. The mediocre ranking doesn't always hold, either. Kansas never climbed to the national average of unemployment in the last recession, or, for all of her exported young people, lost a congressman following the 1980 census. If Jefferson's dream of a nation of yeomen farmers has faded, western Kansas has led in pioneering farming as big-business entrepreneurs which seems to be the latest in ordered efficiency.

While Kansas has lost some of its flamboyancy in its middle age, there still remains something of the old psyche. Her people are not more of one mind than they ever were. Some twentieth-century puritans in the state still talk about open saloons, the evil of bingo spreading beyond church basements, and the unholy threat of a Greek goddess atop the capitol building. Others believe the millennium will come with parimutal betting, liquor by the drink, and statuesque goddesses wherever you put them.

The love-hate ambivalence is still much with the natives. It is fed by history, climate, land, religion, and a mingling of races. If Kansans don't understand it, they have come to accept, appreciate, and, just like their grandfathers, brag about it. Those who stay, in the main, seem to be enjoying the more dignified pace of mature middle age. What was lost in mystery and bombast, Kansans believe has been more than balanced by decorum and the good life.

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