

IMAGES, MYTHS, PERCEPTIONS ON THE GREAT PLAINS

The Great Plains states share common physical and cultural characteristics which distinguish the region from other regions of the nation but do not separate the land or the people from a commonality of values or culture shared by the nation as a whole. Most maps mark the boundaries of the Great Plains on the basis of shared climate, vegetation, and geomorphic characteristics within the region. When describing the region, frequent mention is made of the plain character of the land, the prairie grassland vegetation, modest precipitation, recurrent drought, extreme temperatures, strong and persistent winds, dust storms, tornadoes, blizzards, and hailstorms. To most, these terms form a perjorative vision of the region.

The Great Plains environment poses severe climatic problems that affect economic and social development. Adaptation to the plains has required ingenuity, persistence and fortitude on the part of people who have made the Great Plains their home. The people who settled the land were of hardy and vigorous stock. The ancestors of the settlers and the new immigrants to the plains reveal many of the same adventuresome characteristics and abilities to endure the rigors of life in a semi-arid land.

This issue of Heritage of the Great Plains is devoted to the theme of environments as they are perceived in mental images as opposed to how environments are confronted and actually experienced. Image, myth, and reality are important in our perceptions of the landscape. Sometimes they become confused in our minds. We have the aptitude to be able to live with notions of reality which may be more real to us than the reality itself. The use of mental images and myths is an ingredient of our understanding of the Great Plains region. They help us adapt to the environment.

Historically, the perceptions of the Great Plains have undergone considerable change. Journeying along what was to become the Santa Fe Trail, 1806-12, Zebulon Pike reported the Great Plains were uninhabitable. Stephen H. Long's expedition of 1819-20 led to a map that called the vast plains east of the Rocky Mountains, "The Great American Desert." His report also expressed the opinion that the region was unfit for cultivation and was uninhabitable. Because people believed these reports, though not correct, and acted on them, the myth became reality according to C.F. Kraenzel in his Great Plains in Transition. Later travelers crossing the Great Plains to settle in Oregon and California discovered plains of grass instead of a sea of sand and the image of the Great Plains desert myth was dispelled. In its place a new image was promoted by railroad developers and land speculators. After 1860 the region was called by some the "Pastoral Garden of the World," a description provided by William Gilpin. This too, overstated the reality of the region.

Usually it is writers who establish the image of a state or a region. John Milton, a Dakota historian wrote, "At the worst, there is too much in Dakota--too much sky, too much

flat land, too much weather, too much empty space, too many climatic changes, too many extremes." In 1899, Hamlin Garland wrote about the Dakotas in Main-Traveled Roads, "The farther I got from Chicago the more depressing the landscape became." Seventy-five years later Eric Sevareid was quoted as saying of South Dakota, "It was a trial of the human spirit just to live there."

Not all that is written about the image of a state is expressed in a serious vein. The humorous anecdote can also be used to create an image. Wyoming's most famous newspaper editor, Bill Nye, observed, "During the winter it doesn't snow much, we being above the snow line, but in the summer the snow clouds rise above us and thus the surprised and indignant agriculturalist is caught in the middle of a July day with a terrific fall of snow, so he is naturally compelled to wear his snowshoes all through the haying season."

Unlike Texans who legendarily believe that everything about their state is bigger than any other state, Nebraskans tend to underrate their own state. Historian Dorothy Creigh wrote, "One of the most endearing qualities of Nebraskans is their lack of braggadocio, of arrogance." A.B. Guthrie said of Montana, "Maybe it's space and climate that gives the Montanan his humor, his readiness to accept, his willingness to exaggerate self. Montana is mighty country--bad lands, high plains, foothills, mountain spurs, mountains, valleys. It is rugged. It possesses grim beauty . . . The grandeur, the unpredictability of the place, make self-concern incongruous."

The articles which follow in this issue are expressions of local images and perceptions of two Great Plains states, Kansas and Texas. They explore the role of the social myths of their respective territory. Few states have struggled more than Kansas to identify and clarify its culture to itself and to the rest of the nation. Donald O. Cowgill, former Wichita State University sociologist, stated the problem. He wrote, "Kansans are ambivalent about their state. In some respects they manifest a stubborn, almost provincial pride; in others, an indifference to criticism and disparagement." Burton Williams addresses that theme in "Kansas: A Conglomerate of Contradictory Conceptions." Robert Haywood follows with an essay which suggests that some maturity is in evidence at least in Kansans' perceptions of themselves. Texans, on the other hand, have long maintained a sense of pride, a larger than life sense of their culture and place in the nation. Gene Burd looks at "Texas: A State of Mind and Media."