

KANSAS: A CONGLOMERATE OF
CONTRADICTIONARY CONCEPTIONS

by

Burton J. Williams

The word Kansas, as the title suggests, has many meanings. In tangible terms it perpetuates the name of an Indian tribe, identifies a principal river system of this region, and provides the name tag for a political unit located precisely in the center of these United States. But history and tradition have conspired to give the word numerous intangible, emotional, almost mystical meanings. John J. Ingalls in his eulogy for Albert Dean Richardson claimed that

Kansas exercised the same fascination over him that she does over all who have yielded to her spell . . . No one ever felt any enthusiasm about Wisconsin, or Indiana, or Michigan. The idea is preposterous. It is impossible. They are great, prosperous communities, but their inhabitants can remove and never desire to return . . . They hunger for the horizon . . . But no genuine Kansan can emigrate. He may wander. He may roam. He may travel. He may go elsewhere, but no other state can claim him as a citizen. Once naturalized, the allegiance can never be forsworn.¹

This intangible, emotional meaning of Kansas is echoed by Carl Becker in his famous essay entitled simply "Kansas."² His moving account of the conversation of two University of Kansas coeds traveling by train from Missouri to Kansas affords us with a classic example of Kansas' mystical qualities. One young woman turned to her companion and sighed with contentment as she exclaimed, "Dear old Kansas!" As Becker puts it, "To understand why people say 'Dear Old Kansas!' is to understand that Kansas is no mere geographical expression but a 'state of mind,' a religion, and a philosophy in one."³

This kind of meaning for Kansas is reiterated again and again in the poetry and prose of Esther Clark Hill, Harry Kemp, Noble L. Prentiss, Eugene Ware, Albert Bigelow Paine, Margaret Hill McCarter, William Allen White, Kenneth S. Davis, Dudley T. Cornish, George L. Anderson and countless others.

George Anderson, for many years Professor and Chairman of the Department of History at the University of Kansas was fond of introducing himself to his students simply as "Mr. Anderson, Jayhawker man and boy, for nearly one half of the history of the state." He was proud of Kansas and was quick to defend her. He particularly disliked the "malevolent" accusation that Kansas was situated in "tornado alley." In lecturing to his class in Kansas History in the spring of 1968, he pointed out that for 1967 Texas had ". . . topped the nation with 159 twisters and Missouri had 70." He did not state how many twisters Kansas had, but went on to state the

following:

I sometimes (have) mystified some visitors from the East when I have suggested that I have been in close association with Kansas for, well six decades or more, and I have not yet seen a tornado. On the occasion of the tornado in Lawrence some years ago I was busy grading papers and had left word that I was not to be disturbed under any circumstances. So I continued to grade papers during the time we had a tornado here. And on June 8, 1966, . . . I was in Topeka about six blocks from where the tornado went through Topeka, but I was so busy crawling under a table in a basement that I didn't see that one either.⁴

But a quite different and contradictory image of Kansas was held by many others. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner used Kansas as a cornerstone in cataloging the corruption of the period in their novel The Gilded Age.⁵ Some of Kansas's most notable characters were only slightly disguised and "Senator Dilworthy" is easily recognized as Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy, "Mr. Noble" as Kansas State Senator York, with "Saints Rest" and "Happy-Land-of-Canaan" being Topeka and Kansas respectively. But apart from the classic image of political corruption depicted by Twain and Warner there were other images of Kansas spawned by disasters, despair and often defeat. These images have been chronicled in stories of border wars, droughts, floods, tornadoes, dust storms, grasshoppers, blizzards, chinch bugs, outlaws, Blue Laws, "mortgage fiends," shrinking currency and, I am sure William Allen White would have us include, Populists. "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted," became a favorite motto of emigrants returning to more hospitable climes.

Still others derogatorily described Kansas as the place where you would see farther and see less than anywhere else on earth. One scornful traveler claimed that Kansas was such poor country that the dogs had to lean against a fence in order to bark. Another claimed that Kansas was so dusty the snakes had learned to sneeze. And speaking of dust, one county farm agent advised his clients that in Kansas it wasn't necessary to rotate crops since the wind was constantly rotating the soil. One Kansas farmer who was forced to leave his farm by the "rotational" activity of the wind bravely commented, "Well, the wind blew the dirt away. But we haven't lost everything. Nope. We still got the mortgage."⁶

As George Anderson put it,

Scorched travellers and tourists, sufferers from asthma and hay fever, failures in politics, agriculture, and industry; disappointed and angry purchasers of Kansas land mortgages, township and country bonds, and railroad stock; and defeated, frustrated, and dejected settlers combined to paint the other extreme of the spectrum.

It is not enough to say that the real meaning of 'Kansas' lies somewhere between the emotional almost mystical feeling of its defenders and the

pessimistic, bitter denunciations of its critics. What is needed is careful analysis of the natural and human factors that have influenced the history of the state.⁷

Though Kansas was often the victim of sarcasm and merciless ridicule frequently of its own making, there was no dearth of those who rose not only to defend her but to extol her pride of ancestry and prospects for prosperity. But the irony here is that many of Kansas's worst critics were often simultaneously her staunchest supporters. Two noteworthy examples of this fact are to be found in William Allen White and Kenneth S. Davis. These gentlemen "scolded" Kansas for not measuring up to her potential much like a parent scolds a child. William Allen White issued his verbal spanking of Kansas in his famous essay entitled "What's the Matter With Kansas?" which he published in his own organ the Emporia Gazette on August 16, 1896. Kenneth S. Davis took on the same task, using the same title, in an article he wrote for the New York Times which appeared on June 27, 1954.

As White saw Kansas, the state was suffering from a loss of population when it should have been growing; she had lost money and moneyed men which resulted in the decline of industry; she had no standing in the nation at large; her political fortunes were in the hands of

. . . shabby wild-eyed, rattle-brained . . .
fanatics bent on putting . . . the lazy, greasy
fizzle, who can't pay his debts, on an altar,
(to) . . . bow down and worship him.

In a nutshell Populism, as White saw it, would make Kansas the place where raising hell and letting corn go to weeds was a salutary credo.⁸

Davis, on the other hand, claimed that the moneyed man had loomed too large in the state's destiny. He claimed that

In most of the key areas of the Kansas I've known the economic man has become dominant almost to the point of excluding values and interests that differ from his . . . Is it not strange . . . that this kind of crude materialism should have triumphed over a state once strongly under the influence of New England transcendentalism? How has it happened? What's the matter with Kansas in 1954 anyway? . . . Surely it is time for us to rise again, restore our vital connection with a great creative tradition and thus again become 'a kind of prophecy' for all America.⁹

White and Davis were poles apart in their criticisms of Kansas; nevertheless, they criticized because they cared, although what seemed right for White was wrong for Davis and vice-versa. But had the muse of history permitted them to exchange places in the annals of Kansas perhaps they would have had no cause for difference in their diagnosis of the ills of their state. Perhaps they would have detected no malady whatsoever. But history is unique. It only happens

once, and we are left to ponder why one man's vision becomes another's nightmare.

Barely seven months after White's blistering depiction of Kansas' ailments he penned a sentimental apology for his beloved state which evolved into optimistic prophecy: ". . . Kansas is an American community passing through a process of American civilization in a thoroughly American manner, -- kicking as she goes."¹⁰ Waxing prophetic he claimed that Kansas might someday ". . . become humdrum, like Indiana, perhaps. She may lose her place . . . in the newspapers. For thirty-six years, Kansas has been always interesting, seldom right."¹¹ By 1954 Kansas had become like Indiana, or so it would seem according to Kenneth Davis.

Frankly I do not believe this has happened. Nor do I believe that Kansas was ever dominated by New England transcendentalism. And I say this knowing full well that to many Kansas was the daughter of New England and one's position on this "doctrine" became a test of Christian fellowship in some quarters of the state. And this in spite of the fact that the federal census of 1860 indicated that only 3.9% of Kansas' population had come from New England, and some of these, I might add, were of questionable ancestry.

That Kansas has waged a long and grudging war against "demon rum" there can be no doubt; that vestiges of Blue Laws have lingered in her statutes there is no question; and certainly the work ethic has been pronounced in Kansas. But these things are more largely the consequence of being rural than anything else. They are not the result of any metaphysical metamorphosis or transference of transcendentalism from New England to Kansas. The Reverend Carl A. Swenson, President of Bethany College, suggested this in 1896 when he elaborated on the reasons as to why people should come to Kansas. "We have no saloons in Kansas." He stated,

Whiskey kills; its absence strengthens . . . In Kansas this influence is not found in our agricultural district, in our villages and smaller cities. Even in our largest cities, temptations of this kind are small as compared with conditions existing in our Eastern civilizations.¹²

It is important to point out that Reverend Swenson was describing rural Kansas as a potential paradise, but its cities? They bordered on paradise lost. In a more practical sense Kansas' own John J. Ingalls summarized the liquor situation in the state by claiming that prohibition was pleasing to everybody in Kansas; the prohibitionists had their law, and the antiprohibitionists had their liquor.¹³

Kansas women played a larger role in the struggle for "righteous" causes than mystical "isms" and it is not necessary to recite the activist efforts of Carry A. Nation or Mary E. Lease to bear this out. The crusading heroics of women such as the lady mayors of Argonia and Kiowa, Kansas, though less heralded heroines, made news as far as Washington state. In Argonia the men of that town elected a female mayor

as a joke, but the joke was on them. One Washington State newspaper reported that, "She has put a stop to their poker games, billiard playing and rum selling after 9 p.m. There hasn't been a lynching cowboy jamboree, nor a real old time jollification since she took her seat. Everybody's in bed by 9:30"14

In Kiowa conditions were even more stringent. Mrs. D. Paxton, mayor of the city, upon her election fired the city marshal, put in a new man, and ". . . ordered every one of the eleven saloons in the city closed at night and all the billiard rooms shut up."15

In Topeka, however, an "inspired" bootlegger named "Harvey" founded a religion designed to circumvent such unholy interventions in the operation of the "citidals of civilization [sic]." He named his church the "New Evangels." Mr. Harvey rented an unused frame church house and celebrated the "sacraments" almost nightly. The "elders" wore aprons and smoked five-cent cigars while dispensing the elements which consisted of schooners of beer and peanuts. When detected Harvey claimed that ". . . as other sects have a right to use wine in their services he and his followers had a right to use beer."16

But Kansas had more than its morality, or lack of it, going for or against it, it had a climate unsurpassed for health and happiness, or so claimed its boosters. T.A. McNeal, editor of the Topeka Mail and Breeze, extolled Kansas' climate but with a peculiar twist that might be construed as casting a shadow over the ancestry of at least some Kansans. "That the climate of Kansas . . . is especially salubrious is generally conceded . . .," so much so boasted McNeal that Kansas was ". . . to be the future sanitarium of the world, to which will be attracted the maimed, the blind, the halt, and those afflicted with all manner of diseases . . ."17 C.F. Menninger, M.D., a member of the Kansas State Board of Health, more or less echoed McNeal's praises by declaring that Kansas' weather was so healthful it was becoming ". . . the sanitary Eldorado of the West."18 John J. Ingalls put it in uncomplimentary para-medical terminology by claiming that Kansas was a ". . . country of polar sterility . . ."19

By the 1890s Kansas' political resources were in turmoil. In giving an over-all impression of the political fortunes of the state Ingalls claimed that Kansas was ". . . regarded as a kind of political bedlam, an aggregation of freaks, cranks, lunatics, knaves and fools . . . the Republicans by their folly are responsible."20 But Ingalls also expressed his own emotional commitment to the state he loved by declaring, ". . . but I don't want to leave Kansas."21

By 1894 the political scene in Kansas provoked the New York Evening Post to heap the height of indignity on the state. The Post stated, "We do not want any more States until we can civilize Kansas." This statement riled many a Kansans, particularly J.W. Gleed who rebutted the Evening Post in an article published in The Forum entitled, "Is New York More Civilized Than Kansas?"22 Gleed concluded, not surprisingly,

that the answer was an emphatic no. He summarized his reasoning as follows:

The people of Kansas are homogeneous; they are of one race. They have inherited common impulses, common customs, common religion, and common ideals. They are by no means a perfect people, though it may be said that this argument would seem to make them so: they are not perfect, but at the same time this country and the cause of good government and higher civilization are receiving and will receive as much good and as little bad, as much help and as little hindrance, from the State of Kansas, as from any other State in the Union.²³

As for New York its population was heterogeneous and consisted of "generic strangers" without unity, common purposes and devoid of general ideals. New York's ultimate fortunes, claimed Gleed, would remain a matter of dim speculation.

Truly Kansas has embraced a cast of colorful, contradictory characters. But is that all in the past? Has Kansas suffered a loss of its connection with its creative tradition as Kenneth Davis feared had happened? Has the prophetic lament of John J. Ingalls come to pass for Kansas? For it was Ingalls who claimed that

In another generation there will be no 'West,' no wilderness, no frontier, to stir the young blood of that era with its profound and subtle intoxication; no new States to beget; no deserts to traverse; no fascinating areas where men can escape from the revolting trammels of civilization and congregate with savage delight. The enchantment of the 'Plains' has vanished already.²⁴

In many respects Kansas's dynamic, colorful, creative, contradictory frontier spirit has persisted. For where else but in Kansas would you find a U.S. Senator who would seriously attempt to formally memorialize the mythical Matt Dillon in the registers of Congress? And what other state can boast of a "great train holdup" as late as 1972 conducted no less than by the State's Attorney General who stealthily boarded the Amtrack in frontier Newton and then when the train had gathered speed, "headin" west, surreptitiously startled its sedate, "sippin" passengers by revealing himself as "super sheriff" who was there, almost everywhere so I am told, to enforce Kansas' somewhat primeval liquor laws.

And let us not forget the antics of Eric Morgenthauer who, as a staff writer for the Wall Street Journal, shook Kansas' ego a bit by headlining a story about Kansas with these words: "HEY, YOU. WANNA SEE A BIG BALL OF TWINE? OR A HAND-DUG WELL?" Morgenthauer's article goes on to claim that Kansas was trying to promote tourism, but added ". . . it really doesn't have a heck of a lot to promote."²⁵ And this blasphemy coming, no less, from a man who had been bred and born in Salina, Kansas. Surely he has succumbed to the degenerative forces of the East and though Kansas may forgive

him she shall not forget. Should his earthly remains ever be interred beneath Kansas sod a fitting epitaph would read, "Here lies Eric Morgenthauer who sold his pride of ancestry for Wall Streets' prospect of prosperity."

What a contrasting picture Nicholas V. Lindsay painted of Kansas. Writing for the Forum he stated:

As some of the readers of this account are aware, I took a walk last summer from my home town, Springfield, Illinois, across Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas, up and down Colorado and into New Mexico Of all that I saw the State of Kansas impressed me most, and the letters home I have chosen to cover, for the most part, adventures there.

Kansas, the Ideal American Community! Kansas, nearer than any other to the kind of a land our fathers took for granted! Kansas, practically free from cities and industrialism, the real last refuge of the constitution, since it maintains the type of agricultural civilization the constitution had in mind! Kansas, State of tremendous crops and hardy, devout, natural men! Kansas of the historic Santa Fe Trail and the classic village of Emporia and the immortal editor of Emporia! Kansas, laid out in roads a mile apart, criss-crossing to make a great checkerboard, roads that go on and on past endless rich farms and big farm-houses, though there is not a village or railroad for miles! Kansas, the land of the real country gentlemen, Americans who work the soil and own the soil they work; State where the shabby tenant-dwelling scarce appears as yet! Kansas of the Chautauqua and the college student and the devout schoolteacher! The dry State, the automobile State, the insurgent State! Kansas, that is ruled by the cross-roads church, and the church type of civilization! The Newest New England! State of more promise of permanent spiritual glory than Massachusetts in her brilliant youth!²⁶

Men and women of Kansas, past and present, saw then and see now a Kansas characterized by a conglomeration of contradictions. Kansas' own Robert W. (Bob) Richmond subtly suggested this in the title of his book, Kansas: A Land of Contrasts.²⁷ And this fact has continuously contributed to making Kansas history so intensely dynamic and diverse.

L. Frank Baum in his classic book The Wizard of Oz affords us a famous and fitting finale. A classic contradictory conception. Baum begins by telling us that Dorothy (Judy Garland) lived ". . . in the midst of the great Kansas prairies," with Uncle Henry and Aunt Em. The house was depicted as dreary, dull and small. The description of the landscape fared no better for it was described as sun-baked soil sparsely covered with grass burned brown. Kansas had dealt harshly with Aunt Em too. Her eyes, which once sparkled were now sober gray. The sun and the wind had taken the red from her cheeks and laughter from her lips. Out of this moribund scenario came the low wailing of the wind which was

gathering strength. Cyclone!, shouted Uncle Henry and they lunged for the cellar. Dorothy and Toto, her pet dog, did not make it in time. You know the story so well from here, of Dorothy's journey to the mythical land of Oz, her encounters with the scarecrow, the tin woodman, the cowardly lion, the wicked old witch, the glories of Emerald City, the Wizard of Oz himself and finally the granting of Dorothy's wish by the beautiful and kind witch named Glinda. Dorothy's wish, however, is the key or capstone in this tale of contradictions. She wished to go home to Kansas. To a land that was depicted as harsh, unforgiving and inhospitable, and particularly so when contrasted with Emerald City. But her wish to return to Kansas came true.

Aunt Em had just come out of the house to water the cabbages when she looked up and saw Dorothy running toward her.

"My darling child!" she cried, folding the little girl in her arms and covering her face with kisses; "where in the world did you come from?"

"From the Land of Oz," said Dorothy gravely. "And here is Toto, too. And oh, Aunt Em! I'm so glad to be at home again!"²⁸

You can wander. You can roam, but in Kansas there's no place like home.

NOTES

1. John James Ingalls, "Albert Oean Richardson," The Writings of John James Ingalls (Kansas City, MO: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Company, 1902), 74-75.

2. Carl Becker, "Kansas," Essays in American History Dedicated to Frederick Jackson Turner (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1910), 85.

3. *Ibid.*, 85-86.

4. Burton J. Williams, ed., George Anderson's Kansas (privately published, 1974), 26-27.

5. Samuel Clemens and Charles Dudley Warner, The Gilded Age (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Co., 1873).

6. B.A. Botkin, A Treasury of American Folklore (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944), 312, 313, 319.

7. Unpublished chapter of George L. Anderson's projected "History of Kansas."

8. William Allen White, "What's the Matter With Kansas?", Emporia Gazette, 15 August 1896.

9. Kenneth S. Davis, "What's the Matter With Kansas?", New York Times Magazine, 7 June 1954, Sec. 6.

10. William Allen White, "Kansas: Its Present and Its Future," Forum (March 1897): 75-83.
11. *Ibid.*, 75-83.
12. The Rev. Carl A. Swenson, "Why People Should Come to Kansas," A Kansas Souvenir, 1896, 69.
13. John J. Ingalls, "Prohibition and License," Forum, 7 (August 1889): 673-682.
14. Waitsburg, Washington Times, 9 March 1888, 2.
15. Vancouver Columbian, Washington, 24 April 1891, 3.
16. The Twice-A-Weekly Spokesman Review, 23 July 1909, 7.
17. T.A. McNeal, "Kansas Climate," A Kansas Souvenir, 1896, 49.
18. C.F. Menninger, M.D., "Healthfulness of Kansas," A Kansas Souvenir, 1896, 102.
19. John J. Ingalls to Elias T. Ingalls, Sumner, Kansas Territory, 5 October 1858. Ingalls collection in the MS Division of the Kansas State Historical Society.
20. John J. Ingalls to Anna Louisa Ingalls, Greeley, Colorado, 21 November 1896. Ingalls collection in the MS Division of the Kansas State Historical Society.
21. John J. Ingalls to Anna Louisa Ingalls, Washington, O.C., 25 February 1891. Ingalls collection in the MS Division of the Kansas State Historical Society.
22. J.W. Gleed, "Is New York More Civilized Than Kansas?", Forum, 17 (April 1894): 217-234.
34. *Ibid.*, 234.
24. Ingalls, "Albert Dean Richardson," The Writings of John James Ingalls, 72.
25. Eric Morganthaler, "Hey, You. Wanna See a Big Ball of Twince? Or a Hand Dug Well?", Wall Street Journal, 18 July 1973, 1.
26. Nicholas Yachel Lindsay, "Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty," Forum, 50 (September 1913): 296, 300-01.
27. Robert W. Richmond, Kansas: A Land of Contrasts (St. Louis: Forum Press, 1974).
28. L. Frank Baum, The Wizard of Oz (Chicago: Reilly and Lee Co., 1956), 237.