
Introduction: Environment Versus Culture on the Prairies

by *Rolland Dewing*

FROM THE EARLIEST SETTLEMENTS at Jamestown and Plymouth a varied assortment of settlers made their way across the Atlantic to exploit the land along the moving frontier of what would become the United States. By the 1860s the frontier had pushed westward to the Mississippi River. The vast prairies beyond lay ready for further development and the Civil War ended the delay. With the withdrawal of Southern opposition, both the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act were passed by the U.S. government, making huge tracts of western prairie available either for free or at a very reasonable price. This opportunity attracted a surge of settlers from neighboring states and from Europe.

By 1893 the noted historian Frederick Jackson Turner, speaking at the American Historical Association meeting at Chicago, suggested that the open frontier was now closed. Turner also said that American civilization could be explained by the unique frontier environment of the New World. "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development," Turner stated. The institutions of the United States, therefore, were not mere European imitations. Instead, the wilderness environment had shaped a new product. Turner's thesis became a cornerstone of American historical interpretation. It also spawned a host of critics.

The four articles presented in this volume provide evidence both for Turner's supporters and his detractors. The authors show that those who came to the prairie had to adjust to a harsh environment or they were predisposed to fail. Yet to succeed, skills, capital, and technology had to be brought in. "The development of Germanic germs," as Turner phrased it, did make a contribution to American success on the western frontier, as each article presented here indicates.

"Selling the Heartland" by Eleanor Turk provides an insightful look into the pattern of emigration from Germany to the United States, with special emphasis on migration to Kansas during the 1870s and 1880s. Turk points out that the Germans who chose Kansas were lured by a well organized campaign and offered assurance by the Germans already in Kansas who maintained an impressive number of foreign language newspapers and an effective assistance program for immigrants. The Germans who emigrated to Kansas typically brought a fair amount of material wealth and technology plus the skills and institutions they had acquired in the fatherland. They vigorously maintained their culture after their arrival in Kansas.

Don D. Rowleson's work on the Abraham Pratt family and the Cottonwood Ranch focuses on a British family who brought considerable capital and agricultural acumen and originally succeeded by establishing a well managed sheep operation. Abraham and his two sons left a legacy that is now being preserved by the Kansas State Historical Society. The society's intention is to restore all of the structures of the Pratt homestead and to interpret the English contribution to the sheep ranching and range cattle business in the area.

In contrast to the hard-working Pratts, almost all of the western states experienced a number of affluent entrepreneurs who were lured west by the promise of easy wealth and an adventurous life-style. Typically these individuals envisioned using the prairie as an outdoor playground while employing others to extract wealth out of bountiful natural resources. Larry McFarlane's article concerning the English settlement at Fairmont, Minnesota, contrasts well with Jim Forsythe's paper concerning the English colony at Victoria, Kansas.

In each case promoters convinced English investors that the prairie offered great potential. Local boosters, eager to encourage progress, put the best light on what were obviously marginal operations. It did not take long for the harsh realities of Kansas and Minnesota agriculture to shatter the dreams of the British gentlemen. Albeit, the Fairmont group's determined faith in navy

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beans, somewhat amusing in retrospect, demonstrated a determined and well financed commitment to succeed.

With some levity Forsythe describes the activities of the Victoria Hunt Club and the attempt to navigate a steamboat on the reservoir created by damming Big Creek. British historian Alistair Cooke also chose the Victoria colony for his widely viewed television series, *America*. If the weather proved irritating to the Victoria Hunt Club when it had to cancel its spring hunt because of snow, it proved even more damaging to hopes of economic success as a series of droughts, blizzards, and other environmental misfortunes combined with an adverse economic climate to drive the British out.

Although each colony left a modest legacy, they did not succeed in shaping the frontier environment to

satisfy their objectives. Neither did the colonists stay to continue what they perceived to be a losing battle. Others of lesser means occupied the lands and buildings of the departed British gentry. These, the common people who were not as mobile, were to form the Populist party to right the economic and political wrongs that they viewed as oppressive: this party dominated politics in Kansas and Minnesota during the 1890s and had a strong influence on national politics as well.

As these four papers indicate, great opportunities remain in the field of western historical research. Primary sources at the local level provide exceptionally provocative material. Each of the articles demonstrates strong documentation and superior use of primary source material. KH