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An Old Home, Who'll Stay?

Field Notes from the Nebraska Sandhills

Dakota is everywhere, at least in diaspora.

Kathleen Norris

On an early morning in July 2003, I joined three fellow coworkers on a field trip to Valentine, Nebraska. I was working part time for an environmental consulting firm while finishing up my graduate work at Utah State University. We had been hired to conduct preliminary vegetation surveys in the sandhills of Brown and Cherry counties as part of an environmental audit for our client. In particular, we were instructed to look for two endangered flowers—the Western Fringed Prairie Orchid (*Plantanthera praeclara*) and the Blowout Penstemon (*Penstemon haydenii*). If we found an occurrence of either flower, we simply had to pinpoint its location with a Global Positioning System and e-mail the coordinates to our data analyst in Logan, Utah. Simple enough and hardly scientific.

For me, Nebraska existed only in books and in my research. It occupied a theoretical, not geographical space, although much of what is written about Nebraska centers on its landscape, on its geography. I've read Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, and contemporary authors such as Lisa Knopp and poet William Kloefkorn. My master's thesis devoted a significant portion of its first chapter to the landscape of the Nebraska prairie.

My own family grew up in those plains, outside of Lincoln, and when the U.S. economy tanked during the Panic of 1893, my great-great-grandparents, John and Kate Woodward, loaded their wagon, and lit out across those rolling hills heading west—to the place where they could seek their future and escape the barbed elements of their past: the wind, poverty, and the child they buried in the Nebraska sod. Eventually, they settled in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. But as I read their narratives, and as I read page after

page of what might be called Nebraskan literature, something deep within the Big Blue Stem and switchgrass country tugged at my curiosity. Something begged to repudiate the theoretical Nebraska and supplant it with the real Nebraska, with the place itself.

Before I left on our field trip, I studied the map intensively. I wanted to know for certain that I would see the North Platte River. I needed to see those rolling hills, the “windy Nebraska tableland” as Cather called it. And I needed to see the landscape that led to those tablelands and all that it held. Oil derricks dotting the Wyoming plains. The rise of dales, the shimmering tallgrass. Wind-burnt homesteads that hunkered on the prairie, aslant against all that sky. Creaking windmills. Railroad lines. Everything.

I aimed to examine Nebraska despite the uneasiness Charlotte Hogg expresses about such an undertaking in her fine essay, “‘Settling Down’ in Western Nebraska.” “I was surprised,” she explains “when I found myself resisting authors like Kathleen Norris (*Dakota*), Gretel Ehrlich (*The Solace of Open Spaces*), and Ian Frazier (*The Great Plains*), not because what they were saying was inaccurate or inauthentic, but because they seemed preoccupied with examining—rather than living—a life on the Great Plains” (227). Her resistance to these works is sound and is a point well taken. But as a writer who has walked miles and miles in ninety-degree heat along the shores of Merritt Reservoir, who has studied the vegetation coverages of northwestern Nebraska, and whose family once called this place home, I don’t know what else to do but to write these words. I can’t *not* examine that place. I suspect the same is true, in one way or another, for Norris, Ehrlich, Frazier, and every other writer who has been so fully impressed by this landscape that they wrote about it whether they wanted to or not. Ultimately, I think, we’re lucky that people are examining the Plains at all. Their interest indicates a kind of stewardship—either literary or in practice or both, like that of Linda Hasslestrom’s.

As we cut across Wyoming we did so in a downpour. I looked at the sweeping hay fields and thought about the farmers who desperately need this rain to last longer than it will. Farmers in Wyoming, like farmers elsewhere, cling to a marginal existence, and each year they fight those eroding margins. And maybe it’s worse in Wyoming. Only 2 percent of Wyoming’s gross income comes from agriculture. The rest is supplied by the extractive industrial complex. For mammoth coal companies such as Black Thunder Mining, the weather can come or go. Weather can hardly slow down a

mining company that “produces two tons of coal per second—enough to power 4.5 million homes” (Krza 1). Nevertheless, both weather and extractive industries have contributed to Wyoming’s never-ending pattern that has been seen throughout the West: a boom and bust economy.

More recently though, that ebb and flow of economics has caused some serious concern about a sustained population base, and it is a concern that is felt throughout the Great Plains. A year or so ago, I had a student from Sheridan, Wyoming, who left his home town as quickly as possible. “There’s nothing there for me,” he said. Other than his family and the coal mine that has supported them for three generations. What he said, though, is indicative of a wider problem: there is an exodus of young people who are clearing out at first chance. And in Wyoming, the least populated state in the union (save Alaska), such a pattern is startling to say the least.

Startling, though, might be an understatement according to Michael Lind, author and senior fellow at the New America Foundation. Lind’s article, “The New Continental Divide” “maps” the “hollowing” state of the plains. He writes that “[t]oday much of the Great Plains is undergoing a catastrophic demographic collapse.” Pitting demography against geography, Lind reminds us that the “region [that] accounts for a fifth of the land area in the United States” (i.e. the corridor that runs from “central Texas to the Canadian border”) contains “only four percent of the population—about 12 million people.” By contrast, the population of Los Angeles eclipses the total population of America’s heartland—a landmass “five times the size of California” (86).

And if the past is any indicator of what the future might hold for these interior lands, the outcome looks bleak. In the last ten years Lind notes, “[s]ixty percent of the counties in the Great Plains have decreased in population.” The threat of the modern ghost town littering the prairie, Lind suggests, is ever present as “older inhabitants die and younger residents move away” (86). For Kathleen Norris the plains ghost town is not a threat. It is a reality. In *Dakota* she writes in the present tense: “Ghost towns surround us” (48). Norris inventories the vacancy in her home town of Lemmon, South Dakota. She tells us that “the soda fountain is gone, along with the drug store it was a part of. It’s one of several empty buildings on Main.” “Paradise,” she continues, “wasn’t sufficient after all, and the attitude and belief that it ever was is part of the reason it’s gone” (47).

That belief lives in the thick underbelly of our Western mythology. The

Jeffersonian Yeoman's dream, over time, rotted within and fell into a pattern of nightmares we call depressions, recessions, and panics. "One of the most striking characteristics of the myth of the garden of the world," Henry Nash Smith once told us, "[. . .] is its vulnerability to economic disaster" (188). The American farmhouse, the paragon of upward mobility and Manifest Destiny, as it turns out, was little more than a house of cards.

As we crossed into the Nebraska border, the sign marking the state line caught our attention. "Nebraska: The Good Life." We all broke into laughter at once, as if on cue. Our reaction came as natural as a reflex. Why, though? Why did all of us find that amusing? Is it absurd to think that one can lead a "good life" (whatever that means) in Nebraska? What did that kind of response suggest about place, *this* place? It may have something to do with perception of landscapes in the face of expectation. Susan Naramore Maher touches on this point in her essay, "Deep Mapping the Great Plains." She asserts that "[w]e are programmed to dismiss the Plains" (9). Ultimately and inseparably our reaction—our dismissal—to that sign had something to do with the landscape, with that enormous geography that poured into our perspective.

After we passed through Pine Bluffs, my eyes scanned the prairie. My chest boomed. I lived in a place where two-thirds of the sky was choked out by mountains. And until that moment, I don't know if I had ever seen that much sky. It domed in every direction. I had never felt so utterly exposed, like a spider on a kitchen floor. I suspect, too, that I wasn't the only one who, on some level, felt the same way. Perhaps we laughed at that sign because the idea of living a "good life" in a place where you were left to the wind, the sky, and the dizzying expansiveness of the prairie was haunting. Maybe our only reaction, our only safeguard or respite was in laughter. But people *do* live here—however few in number—and no doubt some of them *do* live a "good life" in the ways they define it. And maybe that is what haunts us all the more. Because we couldn't do it. Because we feared this place.

Some thirty miles outside of North Platte, I spied a sign that hung above a gas station door. It read, "The Middle of Nowhere." This wasn't as amusing to me as it was interesting. To the outsider, the passer-through, the tourist, this place—which is somewhere near Paxton, Nebraska (Charlotte Hogg's hometown)—might well be the middle of nowhere. But I'm willing to bet that to the person who hung that sign above the door, to Charlotte

Hogg herself, this place is far from nowhere. To them, this place is the middle of everywhere. And so it is for those few people who have lived out generations in this windblown country, who have hung on. It could hardly be anything less.

Having been on the road all day, we headed for the nearest restaurant that promised to have a full-service bar. I ordered the blue corn tortilla enchiladas served on a bed of vermicelli. Let me write that again: enchiladas on top of pasta. I saw in that dish a detail I could only imagine as a remnant of a make-do Plains culture. Our waitress, Tonya, a single mother recently divorced, as we came to find out, was thirty years old, outgoing, and attractive. She brought us a cold pitcher of beer and said, "So where are you guys from? Because I *know* you're not from here." The insider had quickly identified the outsiders. We told her that we were from Utah, and she laughed probably for the same or similar reasons we laughed at the Nebraska border sign.

Toward the end of our dinner and our second or third pitcher of beer, a high-pitched tone shot from the television that hung above the bar. The screen flashed red and words scrolled from top to bottom: *The National Weather Service has issued a severe storm and tornado warning for North Platte and surrounding areas. Be advised to stay indoors.* A man at the bar whistled and started waving his arms and pointing to the red screen. I called Tonya to our table. "So this whole warning thing," I said. "Is that normal? I mean it's just a drill or something, right? It's not *serious*."

"We had three tornadoes touch down last weekend," she said. "It's serious."

"Really?" I drained my beer.

"Oh yeah. Where are you staying?"

"Holiday Inn. On the third floor."

"They should have a basement or something. Don't stay on the third floor if you can help it. But I'll tell you," she continued. "If the lights flicker, get in the bathtub. I'm not kidding. I've lived here all my life and I've never got used to them. Seven years ago one almost destroyed North Platte. The ones last weekend even scared my dad who's lived here all his life. And when my dad gets scared, I know it's bad."

"Whoa," I said dumbly not knowing what to say.

"I still have nightmares about tornadoes," she said. "And it's usually the same one over and over. A tornado hits our house, and I'm standing in the

closet with my son holding him as tight as I can, and he's screaming and then the roof comes off, and there we are: just me and him in a tiny doorframe in a twister."

It's not surprising that she told me about her nightmare and these stories. According to folklorist Larry Danielson, "tornado stories are commonplace in contemporary oral tradition of the central United States." Those stories, he writes, suggest "something significant about living on the prairie and about regional identity: the obvious importance of [. . .] providential intervention in human affairs, and the strength of Plains character in the face of natural disaster" (qtd. in Ryden 89). I guess one of the reasons I was so impressed with Tonya had something to do with her strength. Not just the strength of being a single-mom waitress in North Platte, Nebraska, but the strength to hold on to this place at all, her resolve to stay when all I wanted to do was bolt and never come back.

Before we left, I noticed that the average age of everyone in the restaurant except ourselves and Tonya was probably fifty-five to sixty. Tonya is the exception to the rule of young people filing out of the Great Plains. Something tells me that she will never leave North Platte, but at the current rate of depletion, the odds are better than not that her son will grow and move away.

As it turned out, the winds whipped to 95 miles per hour, and debris—a plastic swimming pool, lawn chairs, garbage cans, a Village Inn sign, and *gravel*—sailed across the sky. Back at the Holiday Inn, we drank beers and cheered on the storm from our window, both frightened and fascinated. Fortunately, a twister never touched down.

The next morning we rose early and headed north on Highway 83 for Valentine—Sandoz country. Valentine's streets once saw the violent exchanges of cattle rustlers and vigilantes, bar brawls, and shootings. The town took in and spit out its share of wagon tramps, land grabbers, and "home seekers"—the most famous of whom, of course, was Old Jules. Jules represented the kind of stubborn wherewithal that characterized so many settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His determination to make a go of it in the sandhill sod and to drum up immigration and settlement is a paradigm that is, by today's Plains' standard, either extinct or foolhardy. Now, however, the people who live in middle America probably stay on simply out of habit.

On the outskirts of Valentine we took a gravel road to the edge of

Merritt Reservoir, stopped, and studied some black-and-white satellite photographs of the reservoir. Blue spots, superimposed on the laminated images, indicated wetlands, stream beds, washes, or bogs—any land formation that held or once held water. The Western Fringed Prairie Orchid favors these lush areas, and our best chance of finding the orchid existed in those spots, of which there were hundreds. We spilled from the sport utility vehicle, grabbed our gear, maps, and water bottles, and started walking into the tall grass. The temperature had soared to ninety-three degrees.

The sandhills are fragile, ecologically. This lush grass country can disappear at the first hint of overgrazing or stirring winds. If the roots of these grasses are exposed to cattle, sun, or wind, a blowout can occur. Blowouts are bald spots on the prairie, pockets of sand utterly devoid of vegetation. The prairie farmer's greatest fear is of a blowout that grows and grows until he is left with nothing short of his own dustbowl, an expanding nightmare, ad infinitum.

From the narrow Nebraska highways I could spot one of these blowouts every now and again. If you see a junk heap in the middle of Nebraska you're probably looking at a blowout. As soon as one occurs, the prairie farmer will fill it with anything—overturned cars, boulders, beer bottles, and mounds of tires—to hold down the sands, to defend the perimeter against the wind and the sky. Boards, spools of rusted wire, old barrels, carcasses. Discarded items of hope, both tools and trash. The more debris evident in a blowout indicates, in some elliptical sense, the desperation of the farmer who put it there.

The Blowout Penstemon is one plant that prefers to grow in these bald spots. The smart farmer will become as vigilant about this endangered flower's survival as the most dedicated environmentalist. The penstemon's roots help hold those sands fast. They hold on—like the older generation of Plains people, those who seem to have inherited a sense of grounding from stalwarts like Old Jules. That rare flower holds on like Tonya who holds on to her job at the diner and to her son in the nightmare of tornadoes.

In Nebraska, extractive industries don't dominate the state economy like Wyoming's (feedlots do), but the accelerated depopulation factor has caught the attention of Washington. America's heartland is foundering. Two Plains senators have proffered a possible solution to the ghosting of

the Midwest. Byron Dorgan (D-North Dakota), and Chuck Hagel (R-Nebraska), have drafted a piece of legislation that is a new twist on an old idea, "The New Homestead Act." Essentially, this throwback to the 1862 act that was supposed to bolster the Western movement 160 acres at a time, is designed to entice college educated business-minded thirty-somethings to move into the heartland and set up shop. The booty? Tax credits, halved student loans, and "special savings accounts" for home buyers. Unlike its 1862 grandfather, this Homestead act does not guarantee 160 acres upon which the "new pioneers" must "prove up," but it does suggest that, as Senator Dorgan puts it, "The heartland is worth saving" (Standish 5). It may not be enough, however, for critics of the bill. Some say that the legislation is unbalanced and does little to invite agriculture into the "new deal." Others say it is the only hope.

Right now there is a new pioneer tale and it diametrically opposes the old one. Caroline Kirkland wrote *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* in 1839 when Victorians delighted in the paintings of George Catlin and Alfred Jacob Miller, paintings of a romantic West. Kirkland, a woman of wealth, wrote *A New Home* based on her own experience of living, reluctantly, at first, on the Michigan frontier. Her novel was, in many ways, a rejoinder to those idyllic paintings. Life on the plains frontier, she suggested, was not the idyllic agrarian dream that Jefferson or Crèvecoeur had imagined. It was possible to live a life, maybe even a "good life," in the simplest terms, but the plains didn't hold the garden of the world as so many had been promised.

Now those plains are faced with a different story. It's a story of an old home, an abandoned home, and it doesn't ask who might follow, but who will stay. The answer, of course, is few if any. As the coasts swell in population concerns rise proportionately about the effects of these new national trends. Michael Lind writes that

[a]s a result of coastal growth and heartland decline, a new geographic divide is appearing [. . .] at the beginning of the twenty-first century: not the familiar rivalry between the rugged West and the effete East, or the Yankee North and the Confederate South, but a growing divergence between the coasts and the interior. (87)

The dangers, Lind tells us, are eminent and real. Our overcrowded coasts are of special concern to our political system as it relates to demographics

and equal representation. Overpopulation on the coasts also continues to strain our natural resources (the Colorado River, for instance) while it destabilizes the economy by erasing the possibility for working-class modality. Put simply, there are too many people clambering over too small a space and over too few resources. As Timothy Egan points out in *Lasso the Wind*, “[t]he axiom that water flows uphill to money became the guiding principle of the West,” and it still is, in many ways, the rule and not the exception (55). Just look at Las Vegas.

In the interior, however, we see too few people calling the shots over too much land, creating the very real possibility for monolithic corporate-states to exist in the near future. The people who have enough political capital and chutzpah (i.e., those associated with Black Thunder Mining, ConAgra, etc.) are historically Republican and typically boast a poor track record when it comes to the environment, education, and social issues. And in his essay “Imagining a Democratic West,” Daniel Kemmis writes that “Republican Policies have done nothing at all to slow the decline of most rural Western communities, and that kind of ‘all hat, no cows’ rhetoric is bound eventually to wear thin” (8). We can only hope that it “wears thin” sooner than later because the alternatives are ominous.

For ten hours a day and for seven days straight we walked the banks of canals, the sandy edges of the Niobrara River and many of its cold tributaries. The first day out we poorly misjudged our walking distance, the heat, and the amount of water we needed. Late in the afternoon, lost in the sandhills and unable to find our car, we stumbled from one rise to another under the hazy spell of heat exhaustion. I remember stumbling through the grass unable to tell whether the moisture in my sandals was sweat or blood or both. And when I felt the chills ripple over my body, and the vehicle was nowhere in sight, I began to worry. And hallucinate. Rattle-snakes surrounded me. I couldn’t see them in the thick grass, but I could hear them everywhere. *Snake in the grass. There’s a snake in the grass.* My feet were bloody. Snake-bit, thorn-torn, wire gashed. I collapsed and got up again. *Don’t roll an ankle. Just keep going. Don’t break an ankle. How much farther? Just over this next hill. Just over this next hill.*

In 1948 Aldo Leopold told us that “[w]e abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which

we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (xviii–xix). This was, of course, his ethical charge to those beginning to think about ecosystems and land use. We are not, as many have pointed out, apart from ecology, but a part of it all. It just so happens that we occupy a critical space in the greater ecosystems—watersheds, wetlands, deserts, tree lines—and our role in those spaces imparts enormous and profound influence.

How can we save the Great Plains? How can the prairie save us and those systems that are under the duress of overpopulation and cultural self-indulgence? Can legislation such as the New Homestead Act really encourage my generation to repeople the plains? Are tax incentives enough? Can the quiet of Nebraska’s sandhills entice or even seduce people to relocate? Can you sell silence?

I think so. A year or two ago I saw a billboard on Interstate 15 south of Salt Lake City, Utah. It was an advertisement for condos in a “quiet community.” The message was clear: Get away from the city. Move into the gated community and finance your quiet time. Go to the condo and live deliberately. Just ten minutes off I-15, the sign read. The company wasn’t selling silence so much as the illusion of silence, the illusion of the garden of the world all over again.

It occurs to me that Charlotte Hogg is right. People seem more interested in examining these “open spaces” than living in them. This essay proves her theory. But that doesn’t mean it’s a bad idea to begin with a close examination. How many people, really, understand that the Bread Basket is nearly empty? We expect the plains states to continue on just as surely as we expect water to pour from our faucets. It’s not hyperbole to say that these are dangerous expectations.

I had heat stroke, but I made it. We found our vehicle and our cache of Gatorade and water. We were in poor shape. Cut up, wasted, beaten, burnt, and done. Looking back on that first day in the field, though, I recall of the often quoted Wallace Stegner passage: “As memory, as experience, those Plains are unforgettable; as history, they have the lurid explosiveness of a prairie fire, quickly dangerous, swiftly over” (4). There was nothing idyllic about those sandhills. It was all myth, and I wondered if I hadn’t somehow been caught up in the power of the illusion, the pastoral image.

At some point I made a surprising, if not troubling connection. We were looking for endangered plant species in a place that is *itself* threatened

and endangered. And after seven days, we found nothing. My work in the field was a microcosm of the ominous problem that looms over these Plains states like a roiling storm. The Great Plains were in danger of becoming something of a Blowout themselves.

Having nothing to report, we loaded our car on the last day and drove south on Highway 83 from Valentine to Thedford. We cut west through the middle of the sandhills toward Alliance, and everything seemed quieter to me, less mythic, more isolated, marginal. We passed through a number of small towns all strung together, towns that looked like they had once held promise. Towns like Seneca, Mullen, and Ashby bloomed in the late nineteenth century when the railroad barreled through the territory. The railroad town, too, is an old story of rise and fall. As I looked out on those communities couched in swales and shallow draws I thought about the discords between past and present and how one haunts the other. I wondered what it must have been like to live in one of those settlements when the train was a symbol of the future and not a relic of the past, when the people who lived there seemed heroic, like they belonged in a novel.

In the opening pages of *The Virginian* Owen Wister creates a scene of a bustling Wyoming community, a setting rife with action. We see cowboys twirling ropes, settlers arguing about marriage, and luggage that is lost and found in the apparent chaos of expansion. And it all occurs in the epicenter of frontier commerce: the train depot. In a suggestive and ultimately ironic stroke, Uncle Hughey—after being teased by the Virginian—states “witheringly” that “this country’s getting full of kids” and that “[i]t’s doomed” (4). Moreover, the chapter’s title, “Enter the Man” (which is up for multiple interpretations) underscores the idea of settling. Published over 100 years ago, *The Virginian* helped to feed the mythologized versions of the American West and its overarching tenets of conflict, lawlessness, gallantry, and community-building. A visit to Medicine Bow today, however, will turn up images incongruent with the opening scene of this book and with the popular notions of the mythic West.

If Wister were to write *The Virginian* today, the first chapter might be titled “Exit the Man.” And it might contain a setting of inaction where the only things twirling are dust devils; where banter about marriage is supplanted with talk of (geographical) divorce; where bustling train stations see more tumbleweeds than luggage; and where communities are losing “kids” at an alarming rate. The only common ground that the old and new

versions of this narrative share is Uncle Hughey's forlorn prediction of the country being "doomed." That is if something is not done to save the heartland.

And there is no small irony in how the book ends: "But the railroad came, and built a branch to that land of the Virginian's where the coal was. By that time he was an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired" (316). Like the Virginian, my family also settled (finally) in Wyoming. Unlike the Virginian, however, my family earned their living in skilled trades. They were a family of carpenters, blacksmiths, and masons. They were, in a very real sense, a family of community builders—that desirable conflation of the boomer and the nester. I like to think that they lived easier on the land than the Virginian, that they lived in a geography not defined as a commodity, but a geography that we share today: Stegner's "geography of hope."

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