Kansas History Center Grand Opening Lecture 1995

A Story of Three Families

by Elliott West

It is a typical summer day on the family farm along the Solomon River. The mother is working in the garden, looking up occasionally to see if her husband is bringing home a deer from his hunt. While the older children do their chores, the grandmother is looking after the younger ones, who are running and squealing as they play along the riverbank. Not far downstream is a similar scene among neighbors, cousins of the first family, and beyond them other homesteads of earthen houses and green gardens that dot the whole valley at regular intervals, like stitching along a seam.

This description might be from the Kansas frontier of the 1870s, but it's not. The scene I've just sketched is from eight hundred years ago, fully six and a half centuries before the first freesoilers arrived in Kansas. That family's story is a healthy reminder of some basic but often forgotten points about Kansas and its remarkable past. Today we are helping dedicate this marvelous new facility—the Kansas History Center—with a celebration of Kansas history. There is plenty to celebrate. Anyone standing where I am today would have to consider thousands of topics and dozens of themes to talk about. I would like to choose just two items from that generous menu, two themes that often are overlooked but also are fundamental to appreciating what it means to be Kansan.

The first theme is the antiquity of this place, the fact that this beautiful new history center sits on a very, very old meeting ground. It is a strange American notion that our East is old and our West represents the new. In our collective vernacular, going back to pioneer days, the West typically is called the "new country." But that way of looking at things has it exactly backwards.

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In terms of human history, Bob Dole's Kansas is far older than Thomas Jefferson's Virginia or John Winthrop's Massachusetts. Where we sit and stand today, in fact, may well have been some of the first American soil ever touched by human beings—something that Kansans might take both interest and pride in.

My second theme is the crucial significance of family. As the small army of genealogists using the Kansas History Center perhaps is trying to tell us, families are absolutely essential to understanding Kansans present and past—their day-to-day lives and survival, their societies, their sense of who they are, even the meaning they have found in the world around them. Kansas history without families is a contradiction in terms.

One way to consider these two themes is to take one spot in Kansas—the middle valley of the Solomon River, a hundred and twenty or so miles west of Topeka—and look at three families who made their lives there, not during the recent past but throughout eight hundred years of Plains history.

Between 1000 AD and 1400, families of the Central Plains tradition lived in a flourishing, prosperous farming culture along the Solomon, Smoky Hill, and Republican Rivers.

The first family is the one I described briefly a few minutes ago. In the early 1200s Genghis Khan (recently chosen by a major newspaper as the "man of the millennium") was at the peak of his power, King John signed the Magna Carta, leprosy first appeared in Europe, and Londoners were installing the first tile roofs to replace the traditional thatch. And along the Solomon and Republican Rivers in Kansas, our family lived amid thousands of others in a flourishing and prosperous farming culture. They were part of what archeologists call the Central Plains tradition. It began about 1000 AD and was over by about 1400.[1]

Even then the human presence in western Kansas was many millennia old. The earliest confirmed occupation of the High Plains was about twelve thousand years ago, near the end of the last Ice Age. Those first plainsmen were part of the Clovis complex of master hunters who preyed on an almost unimaginable bounty of game roaming over the grasslands during those wetter, cooler times. Clovis peoples were followed by a series of other hunting cultures that worked within the long swings in climatic change on the Plains. The peoples of the Central Plains tradition, however, were the first to farm this region.

It could only have happened because, once again, the weather changed. A thousand or so years ago, the climate where we meet today and well to the west of us turned warmer and wet-

1. The two best sources on this period and these people are Waldo R. Wedel, *Central Plains Prehistory: Holocene Environments and Culture Change in the Republican River Basin* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), and Jeffrey L. Eighmy, "The Central High Plains: A Cultural Historical Summary," in *Plains Indians, A.D. 500–1500: The Archaeological Past of Historic Groups*, ed. Karl H. Schlesier (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 224–38.

ter. Suddenly it was raining as much in what are today Clay, Osborne, and Russell Counties as it does now in western Missouri. People living along the Missouri River and to the east in the Ohio valley had been cultivating maize for at least a couple of hundred years, but the drier climate to the west, on the Plains proper, had prohibited horticulture there. Now, with the shift in climate, it was possible to farm in country where growing crops had been unthinkable a few generations before.[2] From somewhere to the south new groups migrated into the valleys of the Solomon, Smoky Hill, and Republican Rivers and began to plant gardens.

Our first family lived in a squarish house with rounded corners and about seven hundred square feet of living area. It was dug slightly into the ground, with walls of standing logs probably plastered with mud. Four posts held up the roof, with a fire pit in the middle for cooking and warmth. This substantial, reasonably comfortable dwelling spoke of security and stability.

If we could have flown over the region then, we could have seen hundreds of dwellings like this one, strung out along creeks that fed into the larger rivers, clustering loosely into hamlets of fifty or seventy-five people each. Nine or ten centuries ago this country experienced something of a prolonged land rush. Archeologists today have found that by 1200 or 1300 more Native Americans were living on the Kansas Plains than at any time before or since then.

As with all peoples long gone, we know this family best by its garbage. They and their neighbors left behind heaps of trash containing round-shouldered pots, bone fishhooks, chipped stone knives and choppers, pendants made of animal teeth, and at least one cup shaped crudely from the top of a human skull. There also were amulets made from conch shells, as well as other items that could only have come from the Ohio valley, middle Atlantic Coast, and the Gulf of Mexico. Eight hundred years ago Kansas was connected by a webbing of vigorous trade to the Appalachians, to towns in New Mexico, and to cities along the Mississippi, like Cahokia (today just outside St. Louis), where as many as twenty-five thousand persons lived, more than in New York City at the time of the American Revolution. But there was nothing new in that. A gravesite not far to the north, dating from nearly fifteen hundred years earlier (ca. 230 BC), shows that natives from that time were plugged into a trading system stretching from British Columbia to Florida, from New England to Baja California.[3]

Mostly, of course, these people sustained themselves by what they secured on their own from the land around them. They were accomplished farmers. Unlike later pioneers of the 1800s, they did not try to break and turn the tough sod thick with grassroots. Instead they made their gardens along the softer banks of streams, protected from the blistering winds of late summer and periodically enriched by the silt of floods. Our family needed two or three acres to feed itself. They worked the moist soil with simple digging sticks of wood and deer antlers and hoes made from the shoulder blades of bison. In their gardens they planted the three plants that were cultivated across North America—maize (or corn), beans, and squash—as well as marshelder, or sumpweed, and that most familiar Kansas plant, the sunflower. Dozens of other plants were gathered wild, many for food but many others for making and processing clothing, bedding and other household needs, decoration, and medicine.

Away from the fields they hunted an equally wide array of animals, not only bison but deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, and bear, not to mention an impressive buffet of small game. The

2. Wedel, *Central Plains Prehistory*, chapter 3, brings together the best research attempting to reconstruct long-term climatic changes on the Plains.

3. Gayle F. Carlson, "Long Distance Trade," *Nebraska History* 75 (Spring 1994): 98.

remains of at least thirty-six kinds of mammals have been found in excavated villages, from voles and pocket gophers and kangaroo rats to wolves, minks, woodchucks, cougars, jackrabbits, raccoons, wolverines, and skunks. There were feathers from game birds, the bones of bullheads and channel catfish, and the shells of snapping turtles.[4]

All those leavings, unfortunately, cannot tell us much about the daily life of these remarkable early Kansans. Probably, however, they were not too different from others in the tribes that Europeans first found in villages along rivers to the east—the Pawnees, who probably were descendants of these thirteenth-century Plains farmers. Family labor likely was divided by sex. Men hunted and if necessary fought. Women did a lot more—planting, working and harvesting crops, making meals from plants and game, overseeing all domestic work. Their heavy work load brought with it power. Women held authority over lodges and their contents; they controlled all that came from the gardens, and may have been in charge of one of the family's most important assets—its dogs, which padded and sniffed around the lodges in great numbers, serving two important roles: they could be beasts of burden or dinner. Although children likely were left to play much of the time, they probably had their duties too. Not long past infancy they would ease into helping with a few tasks, and as the years unrolled they gradually observed and learned the many hundreds of complex and subtle skills expected of any full member, woman or man, in that society.

What more can we know about the texture—the dailiness—of this family's life? Not much. But there is room for guessing. A few scholars have tried to look into the spiritual world of these Kansans, with some fascinating results. On a bluff overlooking the junction of the Smoky Hill and Republican Rivers is an excavated lodge, built around 1300. There is reason to believe it was home to a Native American priest. It was built precisely on an east-to-west axis, aligned so that on one morning each year, exactly at the spring equinox, the rising sun would have come through its doorway and illuminated a spot at the rear of the lodge that seems to have been an altar. Its four support poles are positioned at the four sacred semicardinal points of the compass.

Most intriguing is what was found in a storage pit next to the altar—the remains of an eagle, a bluejay, a woodpecker, a long-eared owl, and four bobwhite quail. For the Pawnees, some of these were divine messengers and protectors; the eagle gave power in battle, the bluejay and owl flew back and forth between humans and Tirawahat, the ultimate power above who created all gods, and the woodpecker looked after the welfare of men and women.

But what about the bobwhites? Some archeologists think that those ancient farmers may have looked on these birds as their closest kin. The quail's nests in the grass resembled the people's saucer-shaped earthlodges dug into the ground. The bird's annual cycle ran parallel to the one probably followed by the Plains hunter-farmers. Most of all, there was the quail's human-like qualities. Our own folklore, of course, recognizes the social traits of this familiar bird—the banding together in coveys, the springtime chicks following the mother as both parents keep close watch over their brood. Anyone who has watched these birds has seen what appear to be all sorts of human-like behavior, such as the elders' patient teaching of the young in the fundamentals of being bobwhite. A covey of quail was a natural model for people well nested in this open country.

4. Patricia J. O'Brien, "Prehistoric Evidence for Pawnee Cosmology," *American Anthropologist* 88 (December 1986): 939–46; Patricia J. O'Brien and Diane M. Post, "Speculations About Bobwhite Quail and Pawnee Religion," *Plains Anthropologist* 33 (November 1988): 489–504.

Were these plainsmen from centuries ago bird-worshippers? Did they take pride in themselves as the Quail People? Maybe. We can speculate about that and a lot more, but some things are certain. More than thirty generations before today—six or seven centuries before Lewis and Clark, four hundred years before Coronado—a vibrant society of successful farmers was settled and at home to the west of us, and even they were only the latest in the much longer history of being and living Kansan. By all the evidence, their knowledge and appreciation of their homeland ran broad and deep. They managed to maintain a productive, self-supporting way of life for close to four hundred years. If our modern farmers hope to match that record, they will have to keep at it well into the twenty-third century. These earlier Kansans survived by understanding their country's many parts and where they fit among them, and I, for one, am pretty impressed.

But in the end it was not enough. These Kansans were driven away, toward the east, when once more the weather changed. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries devastating droughts struck this region, and the Plains became much more like the place we know today. Rainfall was skimpier and chancier. Those ancient Plains farmers did not adjust to this change—whether they could have is a slippery question—but instead they migrated to the area along the Platte and Loup Rivers where enough rain fell to support their gardens. Instead of adapting to a changed climate, they simply followed the climate they knew as it moved east. And with that, the population on the Central Plains took a dramatic dip.

During the next three centuries, native peoples continued to use the High Plains, and some lived there. But the population stayed fairly thin until the middle of the 1700s. Then the region experienced a new boom time. This was a changed America. By then the invasion and spread of Euro-Americans was well underway. Euro-Americans had begun to transform the continent and had set in motion hundreds of native societies. Most Indian peoples were driven ahead of the Europeans, colliding with other tribes, and careening off on new courses, sometimes into oblivion.

But Europeans also brought with them an astonishing array of opportunities for Indian peoples—new technologies, new goods to trade, new sources of power. Tribes quickly saw new possibilities that accompanied the grimmest results of the frontier invasion. One such tribe was the Cheyenne. Early in the 1700s Cheyennes were farming along the Missouri River, but late in that century they began moving westward into the Dakotas. By 1800 they were near the Black Hills, and from there they drifted south to around the Platte River, with some moving even farther south to the Arkansas River.[5]

The Cheyennes were being shoved westward by whites and other Indians, but also they were chasing opportunities—wondrously alluring opportunities—when they moved onto the Plains. Those opportunities had appeared, more than from any other single source, because of one of the hundreds of new items brought by the European invasion—the horse.

The horse persuaded Cheyennes to give up agriculture and turn to a more nomadic way of life. On horseback they became more formidable warriors and far more efficient hunters of what suddenly was the main item on the Plains buffet—the bison. Cheyennes also became

5. For useful overviews of Cheyenne history and ethnology during this period, *see* John H. Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation: A Social and Demographic History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains*, 2d ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988); Donald Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).

master traders, first shuttling European goods as well as—what else?—horses among tribes from North Dakota to New Mexico and then hunting more and more bison for trade, turning their skins into robes that were funneled through St. Louis to an eager market back east.[6] A few centuries after the first family was driven off the Plains by slackening rainfall, the region suddenly became highly attractive once again as these new migrants learned how to use horses to forge a new relationship with the country.

The horse was one of the hundreds of new items brought to present-day Kansas by the European invasion. With horses, Indians became far more efficient hunters of the abundant bison roaming the Plains.

Our second family resided among these Cheyennes who were living and hunting in eastern Colorado and western Kansas, including the Solomon valley, by the 1830s. This was a very different country from that of 1200 AD, and this family, like the farmers who had moved there eight hundred years before them, had to find its own distinctive answers to the puzzles of this place. This family negotiated its own bargains with the land.

It was a truly remarkable performance. We are used to admiring Euro-American and African American pioneers for fashioning new ways of life on the Plains. But think for a moment of the perception and imagination demanded from this Cheyenne family in its tribe's westward expansion as it made that great leap from one place and means of living into a radically different one. When we look back on the frontier, maybe we should save some of our admiration for these people—surely some of the West's all-time champions of adaptability.

This Cheyenne family lived most of the year with others, related by blood through the women's line, in groups of forty or fifty persons. They kept as many as ten horses for every man, woman, and child. To survive in the demanding Plains environment, these families learned to live by a shrewd annual cycle. In the spring they could be found living along the Plains rivers, fattening their horses on lush grasses that sprouted soon after the snowmelt. In summer they shifted to the highlands, where they hunted bison on this immense pasture of shortgrasses, then they drifted in the fall back into protected, wooded enclaves along rivers and streams where they hunkered down and waited out the worst during the treacherous winter months.

They hunted vigorously the huge populations of game found on this American Serengeti. According to a government report in 1855, Southern Cheyennes, with a population just over three thousand, every year were killing twenty-five thousand deer, three thousand elk, two

6. Joseph Jablow, *The Cheyenne in Plains Indian Trade Relations, 1795–1840*, Monographs of the American Ethnological Society 19 (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1951).

thousand bears, and forty thousand bison.[7] The last creature, the bison, was of course the most important. This family used its meat for food, its hide for housing and bedding, its sinews and bones to help make weapons and tools. The bison is the largest life form in North or South America, and parents and children, grandparents, aunts and uncles found nearly a hundred purposes for it, including a flyswatter, made from its tail, and a comb, fashioned from its rough, dried tongue.

Bison hides, made into robes, could be traded for all sorts of other things this Cheyenne family could not provide for themselves—bed ticking to line the tipi, colorful material for clothes, blankets, knives and metal scrapers, pots and needles, coffee and the sugar to sweeten it, clay pipes and the tobacco to smoke in them. Measured simply in material goods, our family's wealth increased because of its move onto the Plains, which meant the family members needed a bigger tipi; that was possible because, with horses, they now had the muscle power to pull around that larger lodge and everything that went in it.

These Kansans quickly learned to use the wondrous abundance of wild goods available to them. A recent study cataloged 121 edible forbs, woody shrubs, and grasses on the Plains.[8] Some, like sarvisberries and haws, were familiar to white settlers, but the native menu was far greater. It included prairie turnip, beebalm, and buffalo gourd, ricegrass, pussy toes, and much more. The long and slender bulbs of *Calocortus gunisonii* (the Cheyennes called it "war bonnet") were gathered and dried, then ground into meal and boiled for sweet winter mush. There was one type of red currant, *Ribes inebrians*, that sometimes was pounded and dried into small round cakes and eaten straight and sometimes stewed with the inner scrapings from buffalo hides. Dozens of plants were used to cure ailments from dyspepsia to lung hemorrhages. If pounded into a powder, the leaves and stems of *Lithospermum linearifolium* (the whites would call it "goldie") were said to revive a paralyzed limb; when brewed into tea and rubbed on the face and head, it relieved temporary irrationality. Plants were used as well in making shelters and weapons and much more. Young men chewed the leaves of *Monarda menthoefolia* (or bitter perfume) and blew them onto their favorite horses to give a pleasant scent to the manes and tails.

The key to this masterful adaptation to Plains life was the family. Its members worked together within a netting of interlocking, essential tasks. Men hunted and fought; women put the slain animals to their different uses, saw to domestic jobs, bore and reared babies, and cared for the sick. Children helped their elders, gathered plants, and cared for younger brothers and sisters. This is not to say that the Cheyennes' way of life had anything resembling equality. The balance of work was in some ways grotesquely out of whack. One effect of the horse was to enable men to kill bison far more quickly than women could skin them, process their meat, and perform the gruelling, backbreaking job of turning a green, bloody hide into a pliant, comfortable robe. Women also seem to have lost much of the power they used to have in their communities and their families before the Cheyennes moved onto the Plains.[9] But however imbal-

7. J.W. Whitfield to Superintendent of Indian Affairs, January 5, 1856, Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs, Upper Arkansas Agency, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

8. James B. Hamm, "Plains Indian Plant Usage," in *The Prairie: Roots of Our Culture; Foundation of Our Economy. Proceedings of the Tenth North American Prairie Conference* (Dallas: Native Prairies Association of Texas, 1988); Kelly Kindscher, "The Ethno-botanical Use of Native Prairie Plants," ibid.

9. For a spirited argument of this point, see Margot Liberty, "Hell Came With Horses: Plains Indian Women in the Equestrian Era," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 32 (Summer 1982): 10–19.

anced this way of life was between male and female, every member of the family knew he or she ultimately depended on all the others; without that meshing system of mutual support, survival was unthinkable.

In countless other ways this family learned about the Plains and made them home, not only in their material life but in spirit as well. During their journey west, as they trekked out of the Missouri valley toward the Black Hills, the Cheyennes came upon a mountain shaped like a bear. This became their sacred mountain, Noaha-vose. A great door opened and the Cheyenne prophet, Sweet Medicine, was called inside by Maheo, the Supreme Being. There he lived for four years, learning of this new world of the Plains from Maheo and the four sacred powers. Then Sweet Medicine stepped back out of the mountain and returned to his people with four sacred arrows that gave them power over their enemies and the herds of animals.[10]

The Cheyennes were setting down their spiritual roots. Our family could not perceive itself apart from this Plains home. Around it were landmarks of identity. Above was the Near Sky Space of breath and birds, above that the Blue Sky Space of cosmic power. Below was Deep Earth with its great cavern where the bison lived before coming out every year in the annual renewal of the herds.[11]

In this spiritual universe, the family was preeminently important. Plains peoples conceived of natural forces as living in households and having family squabbles. Human relations with other lifeforms were (and are) pictured and explained through kinship. The Cheyennes' right to hunt bison and other animals, for instance, was earned in part by a man who formed a household with a bison cow and calf, who helped him in a series of contests against other animals. The world of the Cheyennes is an intricate, enveloping web of familial bonds.

But by the middle of the nineteenth century, this was a troubled family household. The Cheyennes found themselves suddenly desperately short of the essentials of life. By the mid-1850s the bison herds were shrinking. The thick groves of timber that sheltered them in winter were disappearing from along the streams. Even the Plains grasses, the most vital resources of all, seemed to be evaporating. One culprit, once again, was the weather. At mid-century a series of withering droughts scorched the Central Plains. Part of the problem were the Cheyennes themselves, who despite all they had learned about their new homes, still pushed too hard, stripping away thousands of cottonwoods, probably overhunting the bison, using up too quickly what they had to have to survive.[12]

But a third cause of the Cheyennes' troubles compounded the first two—a massive immigration into Kansas of yet another wave of newcomers, this time families of white pioneers who were arriving in numbers that dwarfed anything the Plains had ever seen. These new arrivals were the prime force that undermined the lifeways of Plains Indians. They also had their own story, their own variation on what by then was a very old tradition of becoming Kansan.

On the face of it, these newcomers might seem vastly different from the Indians who had come before them. Certainly they described themselves as everything Indians were not. Newspapers were filled with phrases of dramatic contrast. The pioneers were said to be "bringing

10. John Peter Powell, *People of the Sacred Mountain: A History of the Northern Cheyenne Chiefs and Warrior Societies* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

11. For a fascinating look at Cheyenne cosmology, *see* Karl H. Schlesier, *The Wolves of Heaven: Cheyenne Shamanism, Ceremonies, and Prehistoric Origins* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), especially 3–18.

12. The ecological and economic crises of the Cheyennes are considered in Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), especially chapters 1, 2.

civilization to the land of the untaught savage"; they were "making productive the empty land that has lay useless until now"; editors wrote that church spires soon would rise above the prairie, announcing that God's word now was spoken into what they saw as a spiritual void.

White frontier settlers certainly were setting in motion changes far greater than anything that had come before. But the delicious irony here was that these pioneers, who saw themselves as the vanguard of a new age, also found themselves living out patterns and learning lessons familiar for centuries to Plains life. A white pioneer homestead was full of ancient echoes from dozens of generations of earlier Kansans.

For one thing, these settlers, as much as any who had come before them, understood the value of families. Of the many misconceptions about the frontier, one of the greatest is that the typical pioneer was the stalwart individual, standing isolated and alone, nose-to-nose with the wilderness. In fact, the frontier was always a family enterprise. When that new army of farmers pushed beyond Topeka and into the valleys of the Solomon and Republican, they came as collections of family households.

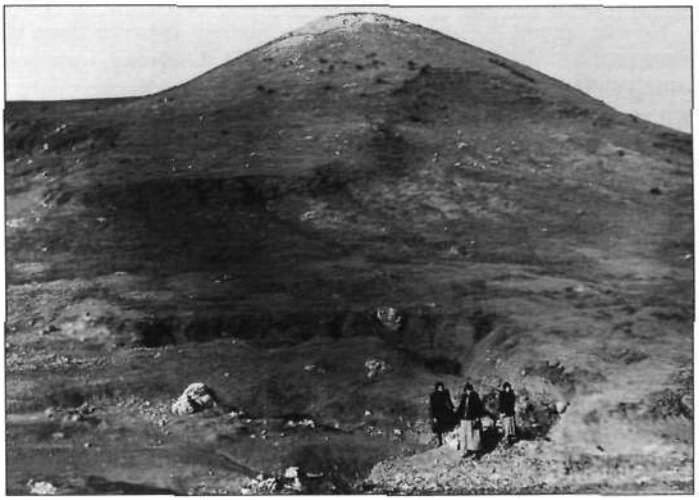
Often whole interlocking family systems picked up from Missouri or Ohio or New York and came west as a whole. Take for instance the Warners, who homesteaded in Osborne County (near present-day Downs) in 1871. This bunch was strung together in relations so complicated that you need a roster to keep the players straight. At the core were three brothers who were married to three sisters. These three households had nine children among them, including two from one brother's deceased first wife, who also had been a sister to the three current wives. A widowed brother to the four sisters came along with his daughter, as well as his deceased wife's brother. Also present was Alpheus Cleveland, described only as a "distant relative."[13]

There were good reasons for moving as a group. At a time when there was so much work to do and so many new situations to face, relatives were known quantities. The Warner clan did not necessarily like each other, of course, but each knew what each of the others could be counted on to do; each household knew the peculiar combination of strengths and foibles in every other. In all work that was easier done collectively—housebuilding, breaking ground, harvesting, fighting prairie fires—these families arrived with tested relationships intact and ready to use. In dozens of other ways their intimacy and their depth of shared knowledge and seasoned intuition allowed the Warners to respond to each others' needs. When the alcoholic "Uncle Howard" suffered *delirium tremens*, for instance, a collection of relatives took turns nursing him through, just as they helped with the plowing and chores for one of the handicapped brothers who did his part by bringing in cash as a clockmaker in a nearby town.

If this sounds vaguely familiar, it should. The Warners—and many other white settlers—lived in clusters of interlocking, mutually reliant families similar to those of the Cheyennes they were helping push aside, and not so different from the much earlier native farmers. In fact, if the Warners had dug deeper into the soil they had cut into bricks for their sod houses, they probably would have found the remains of those saucer-shaped earth and wood lodges, strung out along the Solomon in small communities that had almost certainly been composed of related households, which six hundred years earlier we likely could have seen helping one another through their labors and infirmities (as well as squabbling and sniping at each other, as the Warners were doing too).

13. Venola Lewis Bivans, ed., "The Diary of Luna E. Warner, a Kansas Teenager of the Early 1870's," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 35 (Autumn 1969): 276–77.

Also like their native predecessors, these newest Kansans were getting by, especially in their early years, by a mixed economy that drew on everyone's help. Women, as always, carried a heavy burden—the whole range of domestic chores, gardening, child rearing, and caring for the sick. During the first couple of years of a homestead, they usually brought in virtually all the precious cash needed to buy goods from the outside (just as those Cheyenne women had produced bison robes for that vital trade). Men did the heavy grunt work—busting sod, building houses. Just as Indian males had left on long summer hunts and raids, white fathers would take off for weeks in July and August to find temporary jobs that helped the family over rough spots. Children were real wild cards, filling in wherever needed. As one of their most important tasks, one more echo from the Plains past, they gathered scores of wild plants from the fields and streams around their houses—wild plums, purslane and pigweed, prairie haws, and a dozen kinds of berries. Whenever one boy found himself hungry, he would pull a barrel over to his sod house, stand on it, and graze directly from the greenery along the edges of the roof.



The flowers and unusual rocks attracted Luna Warner to this bluff during her explorations of the country surrounding the Warner family's Solomon River homestead.

Survival was a collective enterprise, a joint effort that included work you might not expect. Luna Warner, teen-aged daughter of one of the three brothers, told in her diary of a family group coming upon a small herd of bison while out in their wagon. When they spotted a lone animal about a mile away, they quickly moved into action:

> Pa took Arabella's [her young cousin's] horse and went after it. I went afoot, got there long before Pa did. . . . As soon as the horse saw the buffalo she snorted and stopped. Pa got off. He handed me the bridle while he went for the buffalo, revolver in hand. The buffalo saw him and went up the ravine out of sight. Pa went to the top of the hill and back on the other side, but saw nothing of him till at last he happened to spy him. He fired and then they came right toward us. The horse sprang and snorted and whirled around me, but I kept fast hold and talked to her and she arched her neck. Patty [a young friend] had just come from chasing the other buffaloes, then she went for him and worried him until Pa had shot four times. Then he [no relative, just the buffalo] fell dead in the ravine. . . . [We] hitched the oxen to the buffalo and dragged him up where they could

skin him . . . [and] they all went to skinning the buffalo with pocket knives. After it was dressed I went and drove up the oxen.[14]

Here was a traditional plains way of life trimmed down to a scale that we can visualize and understand more easily: male and female, older and younger working together in an essential job. It might be a metaphor for what had been happening for dozens of generations along the Solomon, Smoky Hill, and Republican.

No one should overemphasize the similarities between these white newcomers and the native peoples who had come before them. The differences were both obvious and profound, starting with numbers. The population in the Warner's home county, Osborne, went from 33 in 1870 to 12,517 in 1880. That second number was far greater than that of all Cheyennes at the height of their power. With a new technology the newcomers transformed the land much more quickly and radically than anyone had in the millennia before them. These newest Kansans were deeply enmeshed in an international market economy. They looked at the land and its creatures and saw goods—wheat and cattle, corn and the skins and bones of bison—to be grabbed and shipped and sold. Deer and coyotes and little bluestem were important mainly for what they were worth. Take, for instance, quails—the bobwhites that those ancient farmers may have looked on as first cousins. By the 1870s Kansans were arguing vigorously about quail hunting. Some spoke out of affection for the birds, but the fight hinged mostly on money. Quails were good, some said, because they ate countless grasshoppers and other insects that otherwise would be gobbling up the crops. But no, others answered. Bobwhites also ate grain. One man figured that if hunters declared a moratorium on quails, after five years half a million quail would breed their way into four billion birds that would eat fifteen million bushels of grain every day. For settlers like this one, animals and plants had little value in themselves; they were digits in an intricate mathematics of profit and loss.[15]

That said, we should be just as sure not to miss another obvious point: those white pioneers, as different as they were from their Indian predecessors, also were living out an experience fundamental to all who had found homes on the Plains. Even as they were trying to shape the land to their will, they were drawing close to it, first with curiosity, then with affection, eventually with something deeper.

It was clearest in children, the natural explorers of any society. For these youngest pioneers Kansas became not an exotic destination but an intimate acquaintance. Luna Warner, she of the bison hunt previously described, first wrote in her diary about hating her new home. But within a week she was pressing out into the country with her brother, Louie, chasing rabbits, finding arrowheads, sniffing out adventures. She seemed driven to discover and name everything in her new world. She caught lizards and snakes, poked around every draw and buffalo wallow. She began collecting plants and cataloging them, listing and describing 117 different specimens in four months.[16]

Luna Warner was living out a story repeated thousands of times with thousands of variations among the settlers of her generation. Setting out to subdue this country, they found they were taken in by it too. They were changed by the same land they were working to make over. This latest wave of Warners and Sandholms, Smiths and Oscarsons, Calabashes and Sloans believed they

14. *Ibid. (Winter 1969): 420.*
15. Eugene D. Fleharty, *Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 135–36.
16. Bivans, "Diary of Luna Warner" (Autumn 1969): 283, 288.

were something wholly new in this country, and they were, but as Luna shot jackrabbits and roasted them over fires beside the frosty river grasses, as she studied prairie dogs and named wildflowers, she was helping to complete a very old cycle. The Warners were becoming part of the river valley where a few years before Cheyennes had hunted antelope and bison and camped in the groves of cottonwoods, where they had killed and been killed by Pawnees who came from the east to fight in the same country where their ancestors had farmed and reared twenty generations of children who grew up, like Luna and Louie, learning the land and themselves in a simultaneous exploration, Kansans who looked on the creeks and grasses as family and held conversations with God through owls and bluejays.

Luna Warner would live all her life on the Solomon homestead. She would marry Frank Lewis there, would bear and rear several children of her own. In the years that followed many of her descendants and those of her neighbors would be driven away, partly by chance (the Warner homestead now is at the bottom of the Glen Elder reservoir), partly by old, recurring turns of the weather, partly by changes in the land brought on by their own mistakes. Osborne County today has less than half as many people as it did when Luna was a girl. As its children have left, central Kansas today has become the oldest part of America, demographically speaking, with a higher percentage of persons over eighty-five years old than anywhere else in the nation.[17] That old story of coming into and leaving the country, of seeing it fresh and settling in, of conquering and being conquered continues to roll.

This magnificent Kansas History Center is a fine place for Kansans to remember what these three families have to teach us. We are meeting today in country with some of the continent's most ancient history. This land is layered deep in human experience, stories, and lessons that are still being laid down.

This old legacy should be a source of pride for Kansans and their children. But if you will allow a gratuitous comment from a visitor from a neighboring state, let me suggest that pride always brings with it obligations. Kansans whose lives are woven into this country through old stories and webs of kinship might learn to look on this place itself as one of the family. As we treat those closest to us around the Thanksgiving table, so we should treat the places that over time have become our close relations.

If we love and respect our grandparents and our children, we invite them into our lives, we listen to what they have to tell us, we recognize who they are and accept what they're not, and we never ask them for more than we can rightfully expect. The exhibits and the thousands of artifacts and documents in this history center remind us that these same principles of decent behavior should govern our treatment of where we live—places that, like our elders, tell us where we have come from, and like our children, hold out the promise of where we still hope to go. KH

17. "Where Many Elders Live, Signs of the Future," *New York Times*, March 7, 1993.