Civilizing Kansas

by Craig Miner

In the 1890s Kansas was famous as a Populist-dominated state crying for social reform. Some called it sour grapes from a state that had plunged up to the neck in entrepreneurial risk during the boom times of the 1880s and now screamed to be saved from the consequences.

Nathan Morrison, president of Fairmount College in Wichita, had trouble in that time raising money just because his college was in Kansas. He complained that his prospects thought “Kansas is plagued with populism, crankism, Leasism, repudiation & free silver to an extent compared to which the plagues of Egypt are not a circumstance. Soon as I mention ‘Kansas’ and ‘Wichita’ they commonly let out on me in this way.” His response was to point out that the college was missionary work to civilize the barbarians in the West and teach them sound economics. After the Spanish American War of 1898, one anti-imperialist exclaimed: “We don’t want any more states until we can civilize Kansas.”

Kansas has had an image problem ever since Coronado had the guide that brought him here strangled in 1541. Jibes about us have always abounded: A rough looking man got on a Santa Fe train in far western Kansas in the 1870s. The conductor asked him where he was going. He said, “Hell.” The quick response was: “That’ll be 50 cents and get off at Dodge City.”

The Philadelphia Record in 1877 advised its readers against swallowing projections about Kansas. Its weather was violent, it was far from market, and the crops were poor. “Its best people are Puritanic and the rest Satanic—the one class being as disagreeable as the other is dangerous.”

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There were lively intrastate exchanges. A Topeka newspaper in the 1880s wrote: “Wichita is aiming to establish a packing house with a capacity of 1,500 hogs a day. At that rate Wichita would soon be depopulated.” Editor Marsh Murdock of the Eagle responded: “Your estimate of our source of supply based on the makeup of your own community explains why Topeka does not want a pork packing establishment.”

But too often criticisms met with a pallid response from a Kansas population that developed a deep inferiority complex—who were, in Robert Bader’s phrase, “an eclipsed civilization.” We are now in danger of getting to the point of North Dakota, which was a few years ago left out of the Rand McNally atlas. When Dakotans inquired about it, the atlas publishers said there was not enough interest in North Dakota to include it.

The reason for disappointment in Kansas now is the same as the reason for disappointments in marriage: people are expecting the wrong thing and missing the right things right under their noses. In their mad rush for personal aggrandizement they have little sense of the joy of discipline and decorum, of the peace in habit and tradition, of the beauty of the familiar. Kansas should not have to be a dim copy of something else. But it is an acquired taste, which many residents, especially in the age of quick cheap thrills, never mature enough to acquire. It’s a lot like those new computer-generated pictures that look like complete nonsense until you focus your eyes just right, often through and beyond the surface, and perceive the pattern.

“No matter how dreary and gray our homes,” Dorothy tells the Scarecrow, “we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful.” To that her straw friend replies: “Of course I cannot understand it. If your heads were stuffed with straw like mine, you would probably all live in the beautiful places, and then Kansas would have no people at all.” If to be civilized is to be at home somewhere—to “bloom where you are planted”—Kansans have had a hard time of it.

It is no wonder we are not sure who we are. We are not exactly sure where we are. Kansas is not clearly identified with a national region. Minnesotans know they are winter people and those in Miami Beach quickly adopt the culture of the tropics. Vermont residents are “down easters”; Montana people glory in the mountain West. But our ecology, topography, weather, and accents vary. We tend to emphasize the worst of it, saying on beautiful days that our weather is just like Colorado or California and only crediting a driving hailstorm with being native Kansas. We can think of ourselves as everywhere or nowhere, but like capitalism, our
home is easier to experience than to talk about. "Where is Kansas?" a guard in Oz asks. "I don't know," says Dorothy, "but it is my home and I'm sure its somewhere."

Local history is a part of where we are—a large part of our regional culture, our civilization. Take away special language and special history and you have cut off people not only from their roots, but from their identity. The main techniques of the tyranny in the novel 1984 were "newspeak" and the rewriting of history. With an understanding of history, we are not just another frontier state, another gaggle of fast food restaurants, or another random grouping of people.

To grasp local tradition that is complicated, deeply human, but short on the spectacular is particularly difficult for the young, whose ambition is often to leave as soon as possible, and to whom, therefore, as natives, we have the most responsibility. We must not coddle them by distortion, but develop in them the taste by which their home may be appreciated. What of this line I heard that my life or my town "isn't really history?" Good historians no longer believe that: Why should the public? Family oral history is vital, and it can be preserved with a one dollar audio tape. It is part of the responsibility we have to our parents and to our children. Passing down what kind of people we are and were, through our example, yes, but also through our written personal history, is not incidental. How much can most of us remember, exactly, of what our grandparents said and believed? "If a man is fortunate," writes Will Durant, "he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his civilized heritage and transmit it to his children. And to his final breath he will be grateful for this inexhaustible legacy, knowing that it is our nourishing mother and our everlasting life."

I don't mean to tout history as hollow ceremony, or history as confined in books or museums, although those "mystic chords of memory" have their uses. I sympathize with a group called the National Association for the Advancement of Time, whose slogan is "Let's Make Nostalgia a Thing of the Past" and whose mission is to forget the 1960s within its own member's lifetimes. Nor do I mean the generalized, cosmic past sometimes adopted by Kansas as a patriotic gesture. I mean the specific, local past—the legacy of the ground where we are standing now looking into the future—which, as T.S. Eliot once wrote, involves the sense "not of the pastness of the past, but its presence." I mean Realism, which nineteenth-century novelists like Henry James and William Dean Howells thought could lead to moral instruction without the sermonizing, and through empathy with people in familiar, local situations could lead to transformation through what Aristotle called "catharsis."

One gets tired of hearing, largely from historical illiterates, that we should be thinking about the future, or about "relevant" contemporary issues. One gets tired of narcissists writing primarily about their personal suffering and tortured personalities, their "need" for a usable past, and thus truly making a world of words. Wendell Berry states that "all wakeful and responsible people, dead, living and unborn are contemporaries." It is a fundamental truth.

Without the civilizing impact of fine local history, informed by deep and complete sources, and by persevering, continuous, universal, and recorded reminiscence, Kansas, for all our physical vision, is incomplete—deeply handicapped. Without it, persons, families, and communities will continue to disintegrate. Without it, we will be oppressed by the hysterical present as defined for us by the packaged news, and we will be plagued by psychological illnesses related, amid our prosperity, to the ultimate homelessness. Without it, we
will lose sight “of the possibility of right and responsible action.” “I was the world in which
I walked,” wrote Wallace Stevens, “and what I saw/or heard or felt came not from myself/
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.”

We allow others to focus on our gunfighters and our eccentrics because we do not give
them anything better. If we want to be quoted we have to be quotable. If we want our unique
history noted we have to write and talk it
accurately and vividly. More of us, to use a
parallel from biblical prophecy, must have it
“written on our hearts” and evident in our
lives. When we plan for the future, we need
to understand not masses of undifferentiated
historical trivia, but the “pivotal moments” in
our past that have defined the possibilities of
our culture and molded our people.

The academic and the commercial are
unfortunately so far separated that the boosterism, at which Kansans once so excelled, has
fallen to the level of amateur puff. At the
same time the great tradition of narrative his-

tory is in decline as over-specialized academ-
ics isolate themselves into ever-narrower
schools, while popular history becomes
increasingly decerebrate.

Westerners are deed-oriented. Our
defence leaders in Kansas often
are not elected and have to prove
themselves through their works. All the more
important that we know the facts that constitute the register of these deeds.

George Neavoll of the Wichita Eagle, a rela-
tive newcomer, wrote once that he found
Kansans not much worried about their decline because they were “remarkably uninformed”
about the “incredibly rich” history of the state. The ignorance was so profound, he wrote, “it
comes close to being a crime.” Truly “the airless stasis of a bad tradition”— a jumble of half-
remembered, accidental myths and curiosities, firsts, and lasts—is worse than no tradition
at all.

What are we?
That takes study and time to tell. But having lived and studied here for nearly fifty years,
I can say a few things.

We are prairie progressives, a place whose creative tradition in business and true, if
obscure, business heroes is close to unparalleled in a country whose strength such enterpris-
es are. You can’t ruin the place, pioneers reasoned, so why not change it. It is possible to go
too far with the idea that you can implement anything you can imagine here, but the attitude
that says you can is a special part of the Kansas heritage. We believed that living in a dirt

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house is better than lying on the ground, that a brick building was better than a dirt building, that getting there by airplane was better than by oxcart, that bigger was better than smaller, and that tangibles beat intangibles every time. We pushed to make the useful out of the useless, to improve humankind by making it more comfortable.

We have been opportunistic people—people of the first chance. John Rockefeller’s sister said when asked about his success, “Well, when it was raining porridge, John’s bowl was always right side up.” We have put up with bawling cattle, smelly oil wells, noisy packing plants, and sonic booms in our flattlander’s excitement about creating value.

Our resource has been people that have been drawn here by opportunity, not by scenery, and went somewhere else when they felt lazy. They were creators—workers—ambitious people who could “draw the elephant” and then make it happen. Kansans were those people who actually tried to accomplish, in everything from technology to moral reform, what others only talked about. When they found good, they made some and advertised it.

We were tough and persevering. Maybe our volatile weather made us mean. Carl Becker thought it was that and our history of crisis. Suffice it to say that many Kansas pioneers went home to visit the wife’s folks and never returned. The persevering families became Kansans.

We have always talked a blue streak. Packed as it has been with “instant cities” “living with chance and change,” Kansas has traditionally been confident and filled with wind in more ways than one. Other towns asked often that Wichita editor Marsh Murdock imitate the stream that ran past his door and “dry up.” But he never did. He called Wichita the Forest City long before there was any justification for it. He came up with the Happy Valley (sounds like a sanitarium), the Memphis of the Nile of America, the Athletic Ajax of the Aboundful Arkansas, the Magical Mascot of the Meridian, the Wonderfully Worthy Wombat, the Peerless Princess of the Plains, and Watch Wichita Win.

What talkers we were!

“We see here downtrodden plough joggers rattling about in devil wagons,” said a journalist of the early twentieth century about Kansas, “and shooting the Money Devil. . . . Agriculturalist subtreasuries look real. Interstate and intercontinental railroads follow the lines of latitude and have sidings and terminal facilities in every backyard. For Kansas was, is and ever shall be, in highest C. She stands upon the misty mountain tops and yells. . . . She is inebriated with the exuberance of her own strenuosity. The sunbeams are as buttered rum to her. The air is hashish. The water is sake. The soil is pulque. She is keyed beyond all keys. She is the Commonwealth of Hyperbole.”

In the 1880s Wichita, Kansas, was the fastest-growing city in the United States. A Boston reporter visited there to find the secret. He asked one man what explained this tremendous boom, as he could see nothing obvious to keep it going. The man’s answer was “Confidence, Confidence.” The meek may inherit the earth, goes an old joke in the Kansas oil patch, but they will never get the mineral rights.

There are no lucky breaks in Kansas. We have been through many economic and political mixes, and every one of them has been intended and promoted by people who are willing to put their lives, talents, and fortunes on the line.

“Circumstances,” Napoleon is supposed to have said. “I create circumstances.” That was Kansas, which was no better for processing broomcorn, or making lamps, or treating the mentally ill than hundreds of other places—except for our visionaries. The Carney brothers
came to Willard Garvey looking for a loan for their tiny Pizza Hut business. "What is Pizza?" Garvey said, "and why should Italian food be produced in Kansas?" The answer of course was the same as why should one of the earliest helicopters be invented and built in Goodland? Why not?

Sometimes we went a little too far. I once came across an immigration brochure showing steamboats plying Walnut Creek near Bazine. Maybe the Ness City and Sydney Street Railway Company, of which my great grandfather was a director, was a little much too. But we were never satisfied. The boast was that we never missed a chance or let anything we had go.

We had pride. It was admittedly the kind of pride the builders of the Titanic had, and we built some Titancis for sure. We were open and believing. G.K. Chesterton once wrote: "Gullibility is the key to all adventures. The greenhorn is the ultimate victor in everything; it is he that gets the most out of life." There is a fine line between healthy gullibility and hayseedism, but the cynic never created anything.

We have had a split personality which makes creative tension that moves when it does not destroy. Kansas has been both one of the bastions of unfettered free enterprise and of socialism. The common denominator of both is moralistic idealism. An eastern newspaper a couple of summers ago asked me about the "whacky" abortion controversy in Wichita. I told the reporter that was perfectly normal here: we are split down the middle about what to do about things, but both sides believe in doing something. Kansans have had a reputation for being naive and also for being among the most caring people there are. The combination is nothing to be ashamed of.

Often our economic self-interest won out over our peaks of moral abstraction. For example in Wichita there was once something called "the race of the Amazons." Cowboys bet on prostitutes who raced to the river naked. Certain townspeople complained of the spectacle, and the city fathers responded by outlawing daylight bathing in the river.

However, let the economy dip, and the other side of Kansans emerges strongly. The moment the cowboys were out, our statewide prohibition was in. The moment the real estate boom was over, Kansans rushed to government, to regulation, to public projects, to "protection," to "fairness," to "quality of life," and to "aesthetic" issues. Suddenly the virtuous yeoman farmer was in western Kansas for his family's and independence sake, and he was being oppressed by the eastern financier and entrepreneur whom only recently he had joined in real estate and manufacturing speculations. Call it flexibility, call it intelligence, or call it selfishness—it was there.
A Paola newspaper commented on the Kansas split personality in 1905 when Kansas, in a moral rage, drove Standard Oil out of the state and proposed operating a state refinery run by prisoners. Kansas, the editor said, is subject to “fits.” “They are irregular, but always acute, always sure to come, always exciting and nerve-racking. They are bred in the bone and carried like cottonwood seed in the wind. The ozone of Kansas is congested with hysteria all the time and the public mind is as easily touched off as a natural gas well.”

Because we have this problem, we need always a philosophical means of tying our entrepreneurial and idealistic/moralistic tendencies together. We once had one. This was the concept of community building, and it was fueled by a deference regional politics led by people of specific achievement with a sense of the connection of individual and community fortune.

Usually the local editor was the key to communicating this. William Allen White wrote in his first issue as editor of the Gazette: “The new editor hopes to live here until he is the old editor, until some of the visions which rise before him as he dreams shall have come true. He hopes always to sign ‘from Emporia’ after his name when he is abroad, and he trusts that he may so endear himself to the people that they will be as proud of the first words of the signature as he is of the last words.” Murdock in Wichita said: “The community’s joys are your joys. The community’s sorrows are your sorrows. The community’s success is your success. Pull the community down to a small town and you pull yourself down to small opportunities. Enlarge it by your help and you enlarge your field and yourself.”

That is, at worst, a form of parochialism or localism. It does not sit too well with the academics with their ideas of the global and cosmopolitan. But the dreamers and the doers had to have an alliance and a harness. Without it, in Kansas at least, “things fly apart” in a fury of modernists and traditionalists locked in destructive intrastate civil war.

We have a lot going for us in our local culture: confidence, pride, perseverance, progressivism, optimism, moral idealism, opportunism, practicality, community loyalty. But we lack the subtlety, the knowledge, and the confidence to respond effectively to jokes about us or to the outside consultants trying to shape us. Current trends can be difficult. At the moment these include serious criticism by a changing mix of population, of the “traditional” values of the largely white male business people who first “civilized” Kansas, and by implication of their achievements. Kansas itself now seems to be ashamed of its past as part of the forefront of liquor and gambling reform, although our status as a place where women early voted and held office should be trendy if we were informed enough to brag about it. Changes in the larger culture have led within the state to cycles of what Kansas-watcher Kenneth Davis calls “self-assertion and self-abnegation.”

But why be so passive? As Eliot notes, true tradition cannot be inherited: you don’t just breathe it in with the Kansas air, or “sense” it in some antimonian fashion. It takes great labor to obtain. But it is a fine tool. The “Robber Barons” are easy to attack because they are stereotyped by shallow, fact-short, context-short, complication-short, reality-short history. The business history of Kansas is underdocumented and under-recognized. There are reasons to question the political correctness pressures of the immediate present. “If America’s new timorousness,” writes one social observer, “had prevailed among the Vikings, their ships with the bold prows but frail hulls would have been declared unseaworthy. The Norseman would have stayed home and jogged.”
Kansas is OK. It can be addictive. People cling to it like the transplanted Englishman comes to love the desert, although they are often ashamed to admit it. They love it for what does not exist there as well as for what does—for what is hidden and what is revealed—for what it makes of people and for what people make of it.

A man arriving at Russell, Kansas, in 1877 was awe struck by the prospect of an American tabula rasa on the prairie. It was he said, “as unique as it is stupendous.” In this “glorious, bewildering landscape,” he said, “the life currents are quicker and stronger, the air lighter and clearer, the vision has greater range, thought and action get new impulse and one feels one’s self the gainer of new power in the upward march to the blue mountains.”

When Dorothy was blown away to the land of Oz, she believed for a long time in the magic of an Emerald City, where a powerful wizard could give scarecrows brains, tin men hearts, and lions courage . . . where evil wore a pointy hat and could be melted by innocence. She believed, she suffered for her belief, and she finally found that that magic was a fraud. Kansas was not such a technicolor place, but after a time on the yellow brick road she missed it. It turned out she had had the real magic all along, and it was, paradoxically like all great truths, not magic at all. Just click her heels together and repeat “There’s No Place Like Home.”

Everyone should live somewhere that they regard as more than a bus stop. Everyone should feel native to some place, and at home, at peace, “civilized” there. Unlike the poor woman who recently wrote of her frustration at trying to grow an English garden in the hot Kansas winds, they should learn to live appropriately where they are, adapting to the given and harnessing the powers that they find. In Shakespeare’s As You Like It the wilderness teaches the Athenian exiles, according to one analyst, “what they need and what they must do . . . to be at home. If they can be at home—that is keep their human nature in nature, they are fit to return to domesticity.”

Out of our landscape and culture and our human raw material, Kansans can yet create great things. But don’t forget to put into your kit bags a healthy dose of Kansas history. It will be an inspiration, and a warning too.