
IMAGINING KANSAS AT 150:

Introduction

by Virgil W. Dean

Kansans seem always to have been a self-reflective lot—sometimes boastful, other times self-conscious and defensive. Years before William Allen White asked his immortal question—“What’s the matter with Kansas?”—others had spoken and written in a similar, if more positive vein, and more than a century later we are still ruminating about this proposition. What was it (or is it) about Kansas—real and/or imagined—that has caused this kind of often-thoughtful reflection? In the beginning it was, at least for a large section of the country, a “Battle Cry of Freedom,” and at the turn of the twentieth century it was at the epicenter of social and political reform—but by mid-century, for some, Kansas epitomized American conservatism gone awry. While many spoke of it as the “Heartland,” others saw it as a cultural backwater or as a “metaphor for obscurity.” The Kansas experienced by author and historian Kenneth S. Davis in 1954 had “not been distinctive for its intellectual leadership and political progressivism” but rather had taken on an air of “smug conservatism.” Another writer from Kansas, Thomas Frank, was recently even more disparaging of (and disheartened by) the state’s drift to the political and social right in his book-length rendition of *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*¹

Perhaps these conflicting expressions of pride and frustration, hope and despair, and our concomitant self-examination result from the fact that, as Kansas historian Robert W. Richmond wrote years ago, Kansas is “a land of contrasts.” Or, as Craig Miner described it, “Kansas is a land of cycles”—ups and downs, highs and lows—and the process of navigation between the extremes “is part of being a Kansan.” But could this not be said of any state in

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1. Kenneth S. Davis, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” *New York Times Magazine* (June 27, 1954): 12; Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 8–9.



The official Kansas sesquicentennial logo features the sunflower.

the Union? I have used the word dichotomy, as have others, to describe the rise of so many apparent contradictions between generally accepted image and actual conditions on the ground in the Sunflower State, or the “myth” versus the “reality.” Several of the more important of these themes are developed in the following essays. Our hope is to encourage thoughtful reflection and some “honest criticism,” and thus to contribute to a healthy sesquicentennial discussion and better understanding of Kansas history that will inform our journey into the next half century and perhaps enable us to face our new challenges with some old-time Kansas zeal and “creative genius.”²

Fifty years ago, at the dawn of our state’s centennial year, another Kansas historian, Emory Lindquist, observed:

Kansas in the dimension of time, like every populated geographic area, has a history that casts long shadows into the future—some good, some evil—a history not always fully understood nor interpreted in accordance with the facts, but creating, nevertheless, that indefinable quality called a “tradition,” to inspire or to console, as circumstances called for inspiration or consolation. That tradition, from its earliest foundation, includes Bleeding Kansas, Puritanism, individualism, extremism, dogmatism, idealism, agrarianism, and other less dramatic but nonetheless real elements in fashioning the mind of a state. That is, if a state can be described as having a mind.³

2. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (Saint Charles, Mo.: Forum Press, 1974); Craig Miner, “A Place of Boom and Bust: Hard Times Come to Kansas,” see below on pages 70–79; and “The Strength of Kansas,” an address by Milton S. Eisenhower, president, Kansas State College, January 28, 1949, quoted in Virgil W. Dean, ed., *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 12. The day before Kansas Day 1949, Eisenhower spoke of “a complacency, strange to Kansas,” which had in recent years “tended to smother honest criticism and discourage creative genius.” Kansas had become, lamented Eisenhower, “simply one of the midland States.”

3. Here, of course, Lindquist gives a nod to an early-twentieth-century historian and student of the Kansas character, Carl Becker. Carl L. Becker, “Kansas,” in *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1935); see Emory Lindquist, “Kansas: A Centennial Portrait, Part One,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 33 (Summer 2010): 118, first published in the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1961): 22–66.

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“Kansas has shared in the diversified company of other states that have joined to form the great symphony of American life,” continued Professor Lindquist in his “Centennial Portrait” of Kansas. But, unlike some of the “older” states, perhaps, “the countenance of Kansas is not [so] readily portrayed.” One would be hard pressed to disagree after the passage of the last century. At the very least, it is safe to say that Kansas has ceased to be—in the minds of most Americans—a “laboratory” and leader of reform, like (or at least as we like to remember) it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. But perhaps it is still the “barometer” of the nation; too much “America in microcosm.”⁴

This continual, or at least cyclical, “self-examination” can be a meaningless exercise, but one also can argue, as does Thomas D. Isern in this issue, that “it behooves us affectionate scholars of Kansas to pause now and then . . . and think about what we are doing here.” I agree. It is incumbent on us, through careful, thoughtful scholarly analysis, to take stock of where we have *really* been; to continue to strive to present a true picture or interpretation of our past, so that we realistically face our immediate and long-term future with its array of opportunities, challenges, and potential problems. As Emory Lindquist also wrote, “History, and remembrances and interpretations of that history, some true, some false, provide a large and productive reservoir of meaning for the ethos, the spirit, the tone of Kansas.”⁵

In the hopes that we might increase the level and quality of that “reservoir,” the editors have assembled here eight original essays, which consider many of the important issues that weave their way through the history of Kansas. Although distinct in approach and focus, the essays that follow in this special sesquicentennial issue explore the common concept of historical or collective memory as it relates to the history and mythology of Kansas by reexamining and reflecting upon some critical Kansas themes. The essays collected here each explore the concept of the “imagined community” in their own way, to determine how it has and continues to influence what we chose to remember about our past and how that shapes and defines what it means (or should mean) to be a Kansan in the twenty-first century.

We begin with Tom Isern, who examines “The Enterprise of Kansas History.” How did or does that “business” operate? According to Professor Isern, the enterprise includes both amateurs and professionals who meet on common ground to tell our story. On the one hand, the amateurs, such as the people who founded and continue to sustain the Kansas Historical Society, tend to produce a history that is unduly self-congratulatory. The professionals, on the other hand, come to the same history with a critic’s eye. The best and most satisfying state history results when all contributing parties recognize that they are part of a common enterprise: the construction of a history of *agency, complexity, and memory*—the latter, as treated by

4. William Allen White, “Kansas: A Puritan Survival,” *Nation*, April 19, 1922; Becker, “Kansas.” Both essays are reprinted in Thomas Fox Averill, ed., *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 19–50, 51–63.

5. Lindquist, “Kansas: A Centennial Portrait, Part One,” 123.

historians, is the recognition that our concern is the remembrance of the past, and not the past itself. Remembrance leads us toward an identity as Kansans, or to what has been called “imagined communities.” It leads us away from a preoccupation with the “image” of Kansas, as determined elsewhere, and toward a healthy consideration of the identity of Kansas, as we ourselves imagine it.

Although it takes a very different approach, the last essay in this issue, Thomas Fox Averill’s “Flyover Country,” develops the same theme—“image,” and Kansans’ preoccupation with what others think and the tendency too often to allow the ill informed to define us.⁶ “Kansas is in that great middle part of the United States that many people call ‘flyover country,’” writes Professor Averill, and as a result, most people know very little about the place. “Instead, Kansas, like so many other states at the heart of the country, is mostly an abstraction. Abstractions, of course, invite and support stereotypes.” In more recent years, those stereotypes have led to negative images in the popular mind or culture, and Kansas often is a “metaphor for obscurity.” At the same time, our state is also characterized as “the Heartland,” a place reflective of and vital to the health of the whole. But this too is an abstraction based on a “false argument,” explains Averill: “I prefer to live a life that is not ruled by the abstract. Like William Stafford, I want to live by ‘real things.’ Unfortunately, our lives, our imaginations, are pinched into the narrow thinking of cultural image generated by our weakened self-perception and the ignorant expectations of the vast majority of Americans, who only fly over Kansas.” Images of this type can be “deadly for those of us who live here, who are grounded here,” and “we must negotiate a new way of thinking about ourselves and our country”—“let them fly over while we stand with our feet in the mud and our hearts in the land, sturdy and ordinary, experts on ourselves.”

If Isern and Averill are correct in their assessment of the Kansas image, outside and self-, and I believe they are, it certainly was not the case one hundred and fifty years ago. The early history of the state is marked by high expectations and immense self-confidence, which have their own pitfalls. So, next we look at the problematic nature of the state’s original narrative, through the perspective of Rita G. Napier’s “Origin Stories and Bleeding Kansas.” As we reflect on “Kansas at 150” and look to the future, Professor Napier challenges us to reconsider the old free-state narrative, or “origin story,” and the sources upon which it was based—classics, such as Sara Robinson’s *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*. We must seek out and utilize “new” or underutilized documents such as the *Kansas Claims*, which Napier examines here, and consider the questions they raise.⁷ In answering these new questions we must avoid, however difficult, the old assumptions about Bleeding Kansas and see if a different, more complex Kansas identity emerges. The Bleeding Kansas story, which is an important part of that identity, is more complex than the one passed down

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6. Averill’s essay is the exception to the claim made on the previous page; an earlier version of “Flyover Country” was published in the *North American Review* 284 (January–February 1999): 4–9.

7. Sara T. D. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston, Mass.: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1856); U.S. Congress, House Report 104, *Kansas Claims*, 36th Cong., 2nd Sess., 3 vols. (1860).

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by Robinson and her husband Charles, and Napier rightly challenges us to include the “sack of Leavenworth,” along with the more discussed “sack of Lawrence.” We need to break loose from the old narrative and to create a story that integrates the men and women of Leavenworth and their resistance with that of Lawrence and other individuals and communities around the territory. The new narrative should depict the story of Bleeding Kansas more accurately and revise our understanding of the free-state movement in those vital days of 1856, as it also provides a different perspective on the proslavery party. Our objective, of course, is always a better understanding of this place we call Kansas.

James N. Leiker expands upon the original narrative theme in “Imagining the Free State.” Although the “free-state image” has been abused and misused throughout our history, Professor Leiker insists that this does not diminish its importance. Our *imagined* self-history as noble, free-state warriors has affected our *manifest* history as political and social actors. The image's very power emanates from its ambiguity, like the concept of freedom itself. Fervently identified with freedom, abolitionism, and tolerance, Kansans have celebrated their stalwart opposition to slavery and racism since the territorial period. But how does this collective memory square with reality? And how relevant is the free-state identity to Goodland farmers or Baxter Springs miners now? “As a unifying narrative,” concludes Leiker, the free state “has never gained much legitimacy outside its origins in the northeast part of the state,” but it “may yet accomplish that awesome task.” It can only do so, however, “if Kansans themselves are willing to consider the meaning of freedom in new ways. . . . Kansas was never a free state but it has been a state where freedom is constantly redefined.”

Though the free-state image or narrative might still be predominant, it has its competitors for best “iconic representations,” the Wheat State being perhaps the most familiar. Nevertheless, also arising in the first decades after the Civil War was the idea of Kansas as the great Soldier State, the focus of Bruce R. Kahler’s “John A. Martin, Soldier State Visionary.” An image is created, writes Professor Kahler, “in order to better understand the world; it is a tool for aiding the mind. Like any tool, however, it may entail certain disadvantages and actually alienate us further from reality.” And like any image, Martin’s both revealed and concealed; it simplified real world complexities, limited perspective, and was “exclusive in that it idealized the character of the soldier.” For tens of thousands of its citizens, however, it was reality; Kansas was the great Soldier State. Many of the farmers and other settlers who came to the region soon after the Civil War were Union Army veterans and their families. Over the next several decades they and many of their friends created an extensive fabric of organizations and institutions as a way of expressing their gratitude to the boys in blue, who heroically saved the Union and liberated the slaves. Professor Kahler’s essay reviews this subculture but focuses on the meaning of the Soldier State for its most prominent citizen and chief advocate, John A. Martin, a journalist, founder of the Kansas Republican Party and the Kansas State Historical Society, and the state’s tenth governor. Martin was also a distinguished veteran himself and became a tireless champion of his

comrades—their welfare and their memory. Martin and others used this powerful image for good, but such things may also conceal underlying problems and inequities.

As with the Soldier State image then, the image of Kansas the Wheat State, apart from the “wholesomeness” of that image or the accuracy of some of the “fact” upon which it might be based, also tends to limit our perspective by simplifying real-world complexity. In “Wholesome, Home-Baked Goodness,” Pamela Riney-Kehrberg points out that this instinctively appealing image derives from “the agrarianism so revered by the state’s residents, and by Americans in general,” who have long “believed in the innate superiority of agriculture as a way of life.” Thomas Jefferson characterized farmers as “the chosen people of God, uniquely virtuous and uniquely equipped to lead a democratic nation.” The Wheat State image is forever tied to the virtues of the land in a way that simply will not work for “an oil and gas or manufacturing state,” regardless of changing realities. For the nation as a whole, which has recognized the state’s agricultural identity as much in failure as in success, the image of agricultural Kansas persists in the face of economic enterprises that have broadened the state’s economic base. Although oil and gas development and aircraft production, among other non-agricultural enterprises, have greatly diversified the state economy, the prevailing national image is of the state’s “amber waves of grain.” And so, Kansas, the Wheat State, persists in the popular imagination, in spite of all the developments that have changed its shape in the last 150 years. In the experience of most modern Kansans, the Wheat State is an image much more than a reality. Professor Riney-Kehrberg’s essay examines the persistence of this understanding of the state and the degree to which it is relevant, useful, and accurate as Kansas celebrates its sesquicentennial.

“Kansas is a land of cycles,” both agricultural and otherwise, “and adjusting to these is part of being a Kansan,” wrote the late Kansas historian Craig Miner. In “A Place of Boom and Bust,” Professor Miner, who died in September 2010 and to whom this issue is dedicated, examines the role of the cyclic in Kansas. Driven mostly by the extremes of weather and our central, and therefore spiritually ambiguous, location within the United States, the cyclic theme has morphed in our history into economic, social, and political cycles—wild swings that made Kansas famous for inconsistency, as well as for interesting and creative responses. The essay uses the boom and bust of the late 1880s, especially as it played out in Wichita, as a case study of sorts, and concludes that “up times reflected the ebullient optimism of Kansans about the future of their state, while the down times tested patience and persistence. Some called overinvestment in the future greed or gullibility, but it seemed bred in the bone with those who stuck with the prairie and survived to prosper. One needed a long-term perspective, as the short-term turns could be extreme.” Kansans took pride in being “stickers” rather than “kickers” in the face of these cycles, and the true Kansan was the survivor who was strengthened by adversity, as our state motto suggests: *Ad Astra per Aspera*.

“Craig Miner is correct in observing Kansans’ over arching faith in economic growth,” writes James E. Sherow. “According to Miner, this

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The state's past and its future meet on the Kansas centennial logo, produced in the run-up to the 1961 anniversary. It features a prairie schooner alongside a bus, truck, and train, as well as farms, factories, and flight. A bull, buffalo, and meadowlark represent Kansas's fauna, while shafts of wheat and sunflowers stand as symbols of its flora.

conviction would lead to boom and bust cycles, but more than this, it also led to a depreciation of the wild." So much so, argues Professor Sherow in "Kansans and Their Environment," that during the past century and a half "Kansans have converted an Indian-managed wild grassland into a Euro-American domesticated grassland. This transformation is so complete that Kansas has the least amount of publicly owned land in the entire nation. Putting land into private hands so that it could be domesticated and rendered profitable was the aim of the people who formed this state, and has been the guiding principle ever after." While often at the forefront of wildlife preservation, Kansans at the same time have engaged in habitat destruction that has threatened several species. They have

waxed poetic, Professor Sherow observes, about the beauty of the prairies while plowing under nearly every vestige of wild grasslands and blocking the creation of a national grassland park in the state. Although farming has always been a mainstay of the economy, the Dust Bowl and the state's polluted streams beg the question of just how well Kansans have worked to sustain and replenish the very resources of land and water that have provided their livelihoods during the last 150 years. Professor Sherow convincingly argues that the state's embrace of a market-culture mentality fuels its ambivalent attitude toward the environment. To this end he paraphrases that famous Kansas editor William Allen White, the Sage of Emporia, who might have written "that while our values seem set on turning the land into commodity first and foremost, our sunsets 'gorgeous in color and form [remain] hidden from us.' Our prairies are 'as mysterious and moody as the sea in their loveliness, yet we graze them and plow them and mark them with roads' and cannot hike or camp on them. Our creeks and rivers wind through beautiful hills and valleys, and yet we cannot canoe their public waters."

So, what is it about Kansas, anyway? What can and do we know about our past, and what difference does it make? Instinctively, I think, we all seek the "truth" and understand that "consciousness of a common past is a powerful supplement to other ways of defining who we are." But, explained the historian William H. McNeill, "the fact that a group of people accept a given version of the past does not make that version any

truer for outsiders.” It is important to seek historical truth, while realizing it is unattainable, because “myth may mislead disastrously.” At the same time,

a corrosive version of history that emphasizes all the recurrent discrepancies between ideal and reality in a given group’s behavior makes it harder for members of the group in question to act cohesively and in good conscience. That sort of history is very costly indeed. No group can afford it for long. . . . As members of society and sharers in the historical process, historians can only expect to be heard if they say what the people around them want to hear—in some degree. They can only be useful if they also tell the people some things they are reluctant to hear—in some degree. Piloting between this Scylla and Charybdis is the art of the serious historian, helping the group he or she addresses and celebrates to survive and prosper in a treacherous and changing world by knowing more about itself and others.⁸

It is in that spirit, of knowing more about what it means to be a Kansan here and now, that we offer the following essays that look at the state’s past and to its future at its sesquicentennial. KH

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8. William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 11, 13, 14, 22; for a fine, recent study of collective memory and remembrance, see Steven Trout’s *On the Battlefield of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919–1941* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010). Trout, a professor of English at Fort Hays State University, wrote: “In a very real sense, people *do* remember what they have not experienced personally, and the term ‘collective memory,’ as opposed to ‘myth,’ suggests the complexity and power of that phenomenon. . . . Myth can be revealed, dispelled, debunked. Collective memory, on the other hand, is *memory*. It, too, can be studied and challenged. However, as the words themselves suggest, collective memory is far more intractable than myth and far less easy to see (especially from within). Indeed, just as an individual will nearly always object to the suggestion that what he or she remembers wasn’t so, groups that are formed around conceptions of the past respond defensively, sometimes violently, when those conceptions, which carry the emotional force and conviction of personal memories, are threatened” (pp. 13, 15).