
THE ENTERPRISE OF KANSAS HISTORY

by Thomas D. Isern

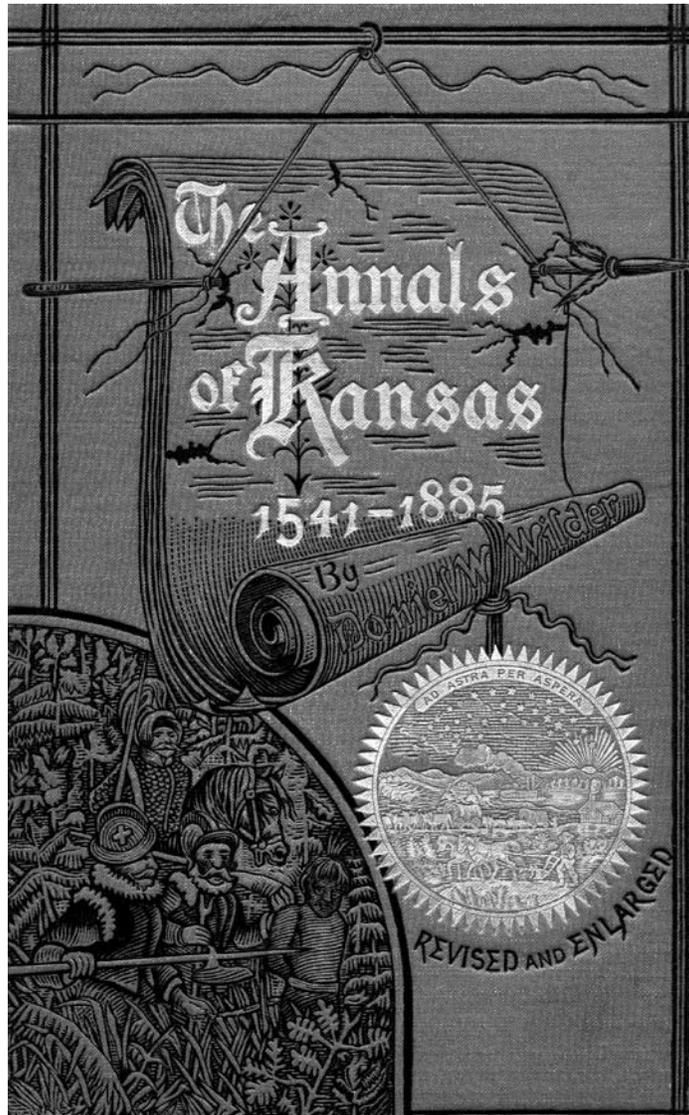
Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it.¹

—N. Scott Momaday

The Kiowa author Scott Momaday exhorted us to return to landscapes of memory with a sense of wonder and an attitude of resolution. A “particular landscape” worthy of attention for many of us, perhaps most of the readers of these words, is Kansas, an entity woefully abstract in its rectangular geography but richly palpable in its grounded history. Many of us, too, by professional commitment or, better yet, for the love of it, devote considerable portions of our lives to contemplation of this place. It behooves us affectionate scholars of Kansas to pause now and then, Momaday-like, and think about what we are doing here. To say we should be concerned with a philosophy of Kansas history is likely to drive away any potential audience for this essay. Instead let us say, it is good to think about what we are doing on this, the 150th anniversary of statehood.

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1. N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 83.



The Annals of Kansas, 1541-1885, a classic chronicle of early Kansas history, was compiled by one of the participants, Daniel W. Wilder, a journalist, politico, and founder of the Kansas State Historical Society.

The great progressive historian Carl Becker is known foremost to Kansans for his memorable essay titled simply, "Kansas." The product of Becker's early-career residency at the University of Kansas, the essay commences with an affecting scene of a Kansas girl arriving home on a train and sighing, "Dear old Kansas." Following this sentimental note, Becker goes on to explain why Kansas is the way it is, why it constitutes "the American spirit double distilled." The reasons are historical: there is the passion for liberty and equality born of the frontier experience, and there is the sense of exceptionalism deriving from the moral struggle against slavery—hence Americanism, as defined by such previous writers as Alexis de Tocqueville and Frederick Jackson Turner, double distilled.

In a second piece Becker focused more squarely on the relationship between people and their history. In "Everyman His Own Historian," he not only stated his famous definition of history as "the memory of things said and done" but also defined the utility of history—what it is good for. His definition, by incorporating the word "memory," makes us of the present active agents in our history. The past does not speak for itself. We form our history, from the materials of

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the past, for two purposes: judgment and identity. History is all we have to rely on in the making of decisions, and if we are attentive to it, we may become wise in our judgments. That practical use, however, is not the one that commonly motivates historians of a state. Rather, state history, Kansas history, is predominantly an exercise in identity. Its purpose is to provide Mr. Everyman, as Becker said, with an “idea of himself” as a citizen of this place; with what in the previous essay Becker called the “state of mind” of a Kansan. Finally, Becker designated the place of professional historians in relation to the rest of us. The professionals are, he said (certainly with tongue near cheek, if not in it) the “wise men of the tribe,” its “bards and story-tellers,” keeping “its useful myths.”²

Becker was a better storyteller in print than in person, if we believe his former teaching assistant, William H. McNeill. He said Becker was a lackluster lecturer, but in McNeill’s classic essay on the historian’s task, “Mythistory,” he embraced Becker’s conception of the historian as a storyteller who says who we are. Early in our history, we Kansans constituted one of those “groups struggling toward self-consciousness” producing “simplified portraits of their admirable virtues and undeserved sufferings.” Over time, however, as we became “surer of our internal cohesion” we acquired the luxury to think more critically about our past, “to accept more subtly modulated portraits of [our] successes and failures.” State and local history and identity remain vital to human well-being. As McNeill, the founding father of world history, cautioned, “a wise historian will not denigrate intense attachment to small groups.”³

The crystallization of such attachments has become a preoccupation of historians, especially since publication in 1983 of a book called *Imagined Communities*, by Benedict Anderson. Anderson was concerned with how national—whether Brazilian, American, Italian, or Indonesian—and other identities happen. They are, he said, imagined communities. To apply this idea to Kansas, consider how many of its 2.7 million people any one individual can know personally. Not very many—and still, we imagine, without really knowing, we have something in common with the rest of them, that we are some kind of community, that we share a “deep, horizontal comradeship.” Anderson emphasized the importance of “print capitalism” in the formation of identity—we think readily of the *Herald of Freedom* and all our assertive frontier editors in Kansas—in establishing imagined communities bearing a “fortuitous relationship to existing political boundaries” (such as the lop-eared rectangle that is Kansas) so that “administrative units” (a territory, for instance) might come “to be conceived as fatherlands.” The beauty of such imagined identities, Anderson concluded, is that they are “joinable in time”: “The son of an Italian immigrant to New York will find ancestors in the Pilgrim Fathers.” Likewise, we might add, the daughter of

2. Carl L. Becker, “Kansas,” and “Everyman His Own Historian,” in *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1935), 1, 27, 235, 245.

3. William H. McNeill, “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,” in *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3–22, quotations 13, 17.

a Hispanic packinghouse worker might find forebears in her adopted state's historic struggle for freedom and opportunity.⁴

Survey of the early publications of the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS), combined with a bibliophile's knowledge of historical literature, confirms that Carl Becker, in "Kansas," which seems like a casual interpretive squib, astutely identified the main currents of our state's mythistory for the first two or three generations of its existence. Following the territorial struggle and the great Civil War, Kansans predominantly told stories of the underdog fight against slavery and of the righteous triumph of liberty. We embraced an identity as the battleground of freedom. Our chroniclers seized the historical and moral high ground. In time, though, as the partisans of the old days died off, and as more and more members of the Grand Army of the Republic departed for that great encampment in the sky, the passionate attachment to their memory faded. At the same time, white settlement sprawled across the plains to the Colorado line, into semiarid prairies that never tasted the blood of bushwhacker or jayhawker. Kansans came to require a new, or at least an additional story to tell that encompassed the full Kansas experience. They would find that story in the American myth of the frontier.

While the passions of fraternal strife were fresh in mind, however, they dominated the historical narrative; in fact, the storytelling commenced while the conflict was in progress. One of the most impassioned storytellers at the time was Sara Robinson, who commenced publishing in 1856 with *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* and contributed much to the state's "origin story," discussed elsewhere in this issue by the historian Rita Napier. Robinson developed her history in a fashion to maximize empathy and outrage. Early in the narrative she established both the righteous, God-fearing nature of her fellow settlers and their right to sympathy on account of their suffering—living in tents and battling disease and rattlesnakes. They also confront ever-worse tyrannies of the "slave power," climaxing with the sack of Lawrence in 1856. Robinson then appealed to right-thinking Americans across the land to rally to her cause: "Men of the North, shall the brave hearts in Kansas struggle alone?"⁵

The second strike on Lawrence, Quantrill's raid of 1863, likewise inspired another writer to impassioned prose. The Reverend Richard Cordley, a minister of the Congregational faith, saw his Lawrence residence burned

Kansas

SOME years ago, in a New England college town, when I informed one of my New England friends that I was preparing to go to Kansas, he replied rather blankly, "Kansas?! Oh." The amenities of casual intercourse demanded a reply, certainly, but from the point of view of my New England friend I suppose there was really nothing more to say; and, in fact, standing there under the peaceful New England elms, Kansas did seem tolerably remote. Some months later I rode out of Kansas City and entered for the first time what I had always pictured as the land of grasshoppers, of arid drought, and barren social experimentation. In the seat just ahead were two young women, girls rather, whom I afterwards saw at the university. As we left the dreary yards behind, and entered the half-open country along the Kansas River, one of the pair, breaking abruptly away from the ceaseless chatter that had hitherto engrossed them both, began looking out of the car window. Her attention seemed fixed, for perhaps a quarter of an hour, upon something in the scene outside—the fields of corn, or it may have been the sunflowers that lined the track; but at last, turning to her companion with the contented sigh of a returning exile, she said, "Dear old Kansas!" The expression somehow recalled my New England friend. I wondered vaguely, as I was sure he would have done, why any one should feel moved to say "Dear old Kansas!" I had supposed

The great progressive historian Carl Becker is known foremost to Kansans for his memorable essay titled simply, "Kansas," the first page of which is pictured here. The product of Becker's early-career residency at the University of Kansas, the essay explains why Kansas is the way it is, why it constitutes "the American spirit double distilled."

4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), quotations 7, 46, 53, 145.

5. Robinson's book is available online at <http://www.kancoll.org/books/robinson/>; see also Julie Courtwright, "'A Goblin That Drives Her Insane': Sara Robinson and the History Wars of Kansas, 1894–1911," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Summer 2002): 102–23.

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in 1863, but nevertheless, his ministerial and historical career in Kansas continued for a half-century thereafter, and he chronicled the Lawrence outrage, first in a letter read into the *Congressional Record* and then in a booklet published in 1865. Stirred to hyperbole, he wrote, "It is doubtful whether the world has ever witnessed such a scene of horror"; it was "Hell let loose." Over time the man of God allowed a modicum of forgiveness to temper his anger, but he never ceased to tell his story of the crusade against slavery.⁶

The free-soil, free-state interpretation of the origins of Kansas was not only a matter of memoir. It had secondary, academic support, particularly in the person of Professor Leverett Wilson Spring, University of Kansas. In *Kansas: The Prelude to the War for the Union*, published in 1885, Spring confirmed the righteousness of the cause and its significance to America. "The career of the free-state party," he asserted, "has no parallel in American history. Composed of heterogeneous, clashing, feverish elements . . . the party was not only successfully held together during this chaotic period, but . . . [it] rescued Kansas from the clutch of Missouri, and then disbanded"—although its historians remained united and full-voiced!

By the time of publication of the monumental Andreas *History of the State of Kansas* in 1883, historical hyperbole was arousing some skepticism. Its authors allowed, "During those exciting times it is doubtful whether a single unprejudiced person told the story." Nevertheless, on the origins of the state, they wrote, "The heroic struggles during its infant life to eradicate the taint, and its final entry, unpolluted, into the family of states, constitutes the brightest page in American history." They forgave John Brown his murders, placing on him "the seal of martyrdom." They forgave Jim Lane his dishonesty and lunacy, leaving "his virtues enshrined in the hearts of thousands all over Kansas."⁷

That by the late nineteenth century some parties were growing weary of this sort of whitewashing rhetoric is indicated in an essay penned by John James Ingalls, United States senator and respected literary man. Ingalls became upset with early revisionist writers, such as the Reverend David N. Utter, who questioned the virtue and even the sanity of John Brown. After citing the English historian Carlyle on the power of commitment and martyrdom to bring about needful reform, Ingalls concluded, "the three men of this era who will loom forever against the remotest horizon of time, as the Pyramids, above the voiceless deserts, or mountain peaks over the subordinate plains, are Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and Old John Brown of Osawatomie."⁸

6. "The Lawrence Massacre by a Band of Missourians Under Quantrill," available online at http://www.kancoll.org/books/cordley_massacre/quantrel.raid.html; see also Richard Cordley, *History of Lawrence* (Lawrence, Kans.: Lawrence Journal Press, 1895); and Cordley, *Pioneer Days in Kansas* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1903), also available online at <http://www.kancoll.org/>. See also Nathan Wilson, "Congregationalist Richard Cordley and the Impact of New England Cultural Imperialism in Kansas, 1857–1904," *Great Plains Quarterly* 24 (Summer 2004): 185–200.

7. Leverett Spring, *Kansas: The Prelude to the War for the Union* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton, Mifflin, 1885, reprint 1906), online at <http://www.kancoll.org/books/spring/>; *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, Ill.: A. T. Andreas, 1883), 1:preface, 300–1.

8. John James Ingalls, "John Brown's Place in History," in *A Collection of the Writings of John James Ingalls: Essays, Addresses, and Orations* (Kansas City, Mo.: Hudson-Kimberly, 1902), 76–92, quotation 92.

There would come a time when academic revisionist historians would critically examine and systematically undermine the old free-soil narrative of Kansas history—Alice Nichols’s *Bleeding Kansas* would be a landmark in that process—but it was not they who changed the general conception of Kansas history. By the time of their heyday in the mid-twentieth century, historical storytelling in Kansas, while not abandoning the old battleground of freedom motif, had migrated to a new field—the western frontier. Yes, Kansans mourned the passing of Mother Bickerdyke, the heroic and indomitable Civil War nurse, in Bunker Hill in 1901. And yes, the town of Delphos still celebrates the fact that it was the home of “Lincoln’s Little Girl,” Grace Bedell—the child who in 1860 wrote to candidate Abraham Lincoln and advised him to grow a beard. Bickerdyke, however, had become as well known for her efforts to settle Union veterans on farms in central Kansas, and to raise relief funds for farmers beset by grasshopper plagues, as for her wartime service, and a grown-up Grace Bedell had come to Kansas with her husband, George Billings, to take a homestead.⁹

Academic historians are wont to ascribe the prevalence of frontier mythology in the historical conceptions of Kansans and Americans to the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner, author of “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” an essay dating from 1893. Narrative preoccupation with the frontier experience, however, was as much a matter of popular sentiment informing Turner’s writing, and maybe more so, than the reverse. Americans, and in particular Kansans, were all too ready to be convinced that it was the frontier experience that defined them.

Historian David Wrobel found that frontier mythology originated on the frontier itself and was perpetuated by the pioneer generation.¹⁰ On every western frontier, as settlers arrived, or even ahead of them, boosters papered the country with promotional tracts extolling its virtues and telling a story of transformation and prosperity in which the settlers would figure. The boosters produced their tracts for the benefit of railroad and real estate companies, but their exaggerations left a watermark on regional rhetoric. Although generally things did not work out quite as happily as the boosters predicted, the storyline was not dropped; it was taken up by a new cadre of narrators, the reminiscers. These were the veterans of frontier settlement who populated the old settler associations found in nearly every western community. In old settler picnic addresses and in reminiscent writings they often told tales of hardship, but also of

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9. Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954); for a survey of the evolving literature on the subject, see Gunja SenGupta, “Bleeding Kansas: A Review Essay,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Winter 2001–2002): 318–41; for Bickerdyke, see Julia A. Chase, “Mother Bickerdyke,” *Kansas Historical Collections, 1901–1902* 7 (1902): 189–98; biographical sketch, in Frank W. Blackmar, ed., *Kansas: A Cyclopaedia of State History* (Chicago, Ill.: Standard Pub. Co., 1912), 1:178–79, online at http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/b/bickerdyke_mary_ann.html; Bruce R. Kahler, “Mary Ann ‘Mother’ Bickerdyke: A Gilded Age Icon,” in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 115–26. Biographical details for Grace Bedell, as well as the text of her letter to Lincoln and information on Lincoln’s Little Girl monument in Delphos, are found online at <http://www.gracebedellfoundation.org/>.

10. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921), 1–38; David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).



Sara Tappan Doolittle Lawrence Robinson—who, like her husband, Kansas's first governor Charles Robinson, was a native of Massachusetts—published her version of the state's "origin story" in her 1856 *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*. She fashioned her history to maximize empathy and outrage in an effort to rally others to the cause of antislavery. Robinson, pictured here in 1857, asked her readers in a defiant call to action, "shall the brave hearts in Kansas struggle alone?"

perseverance, eventually proving up the promise of the country.

This type of narrative development certainly happened in Kansas, as elsewhere in the West. The collections of the Kansas Historical Society are full of promotional tracts. "Immigrants are pouring into the State," declared the capitalist T. C. Henry, promoting land purchases in Dickinson County. "Men looking for farms, men looking for locations in which to engage in mercantile, manufacturing or professional pursuits, are coming by hundreds and thousands. Men of capital and men of small means, men looking for homesteads, and men seeking large improved farms, are coming. They are coming in colonies, in squads, and singly. They are coming in canvas-covered wagons, with wife, children, and household furniture, or by rail, with their carpet-bags and certificates of deposit." Once the country was settled, too, Kansas had its share of old settler reminiscers. The address of Arthur J. Stanley to the Old Settlers' Reunion in Lincoln on September 15, 1915, exemplified the triumphal way they told their story. "Feeling the potency of the West and the virility of the splendid men and women who, like Caesar, came, saw, and conquered, I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to be with you to-day," he declared. "It was in this country I first saw the light of day and grew to young manhood. . . . Here every standard of life and

every ideal of character or duty I possess was formed and fashioned, and here—I feel at home." No one could testify to the frontier experience like an old settler!¹¹

This second great theme of Kansas mythistory, the frontier, also required conflict to enliven the storyline, and conflict was not lacking. First, there was conflict with the Indians who resisted white inroads. Particularly gripping to settlers were stories of Indian captivity, which emphasized the perceived savagery of the captors. The story of the four German girls, taken by Cheyenne Indians in western Kansas, was the subject of a lurid published account. In Grace Bedell Billings's own little town of Delphos also lived Anna Brewster Morgan, who had experienced Cheyenne captivity, and who never successfully readjusted to life with her white

11. Promotional tracts include *Dickinson County, Kansas: Henry's Advertiser* (Abilene, Kans.: T. C. Henry & Co., 1878); F. G. Adams, *The Homestead Guide, Describing the Great Homestead Region in Kansas and Nebraska* (Waterville, Kans.: F. G. Adams, 1873); *Emigrants' Guide to the Kansas Pacific Railway Lands* (Lawrence: Kansas Pacific Railway Co., 1871). Numerous examples are available on Kansas Memory: see, for example, *A Handbook of Useful Information for Immigrants and Settlers* (Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, 1880–1889), online at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/1214>; and Lawrence D. Burch, *Kansas as It Is: A Complete Review of the Resources, Advantages and Drawbacks of the Great Central State* (Chicago, Ill.: C. S. Burch, 1878), online at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/55036>. *Dickinson County, Kansas: Henry's Advertiser*, 5; Stanley, "Address before the Old Settlers' Reunion, Lincoln, Kansas, 17 September 1915," online at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/219446>.

family.¹² Second, there was conflict with stockmen who, by occupying and attempting to hold the land with their cattle, were considered obstacles to progress. T. C. Henry's kid brother Stuart, in *Conquering Our Great American Plains*, was most concerned with telling how T. C. civilized Abilene and the surrounding country by driving away the cattlemen and settling the country with upright farmers. In Sherman County during the 1880s, wrote Elmer Ellsworth Blackman, who was trying to prove up a claim, "The cattlemen had held undisputed possession of these range lands so long, that great herds of range cattle roamed at will over the settlers' crops as well as the unbroken prairie." The homesteaders not only took to shooting the cattle but also formed a protective association among themselves to stand up for their interests against the cattlemen. Third, there was conflict among the settlers themselves, particularly around the question of locating county seats. The most notorious of all the county seat wars took place in Stevens County, but many counties had such conflicts. "If the people of southwestern Kansas have a passion for anything, it is their hungry desire for county seats," J. S. Painter of Garden City told the Kansas State Historical Society in 1888. "Most of the counties have three. . . . They are usually distinguished as the county seat *de facto*, the county seat *de jure*, and the one that is under consideration by the Supreme Court."¹³

The great conflict, however, or at least the greatest source of hardship, was with the land itself and the harsh environmental conditions. Drought, hot winds, blizzards, tornadoes, prairie fires, and grasshoppers figure in every frontier memoir, every county history. Surely the greatest of all memoirs of frontier hardship is the classic *Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Homestead*, by John Ise. After growing up on a homestead near Downs, Ise went on to a distinguished academic career as a natural resource economist at the University of Kansas. The Ise family works hard and suffers mightily in his book, to be sure, and his mother, Rosie, works hardest and suffers the most. It is instructive to remember that John Ise of life is little Joe of the book, the boy with polio. Afflicted by both the disease and misguided treatments for it, Ise did have a hard childhood, and he was around the house most the time, thus observing and identifying with his mother's trials. An Ise family monument still standing in the Downs cemetery is perhaps a little too self-pitying in memorializing "especially the hapless children," who suffered so much on the frontier. At any rate,

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12. Grace E. Meredith, *Girl Captives of the Cheyennes: A True Story of the Capture and Rescue of Four Pioneer Girls* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Gem Publishing Co., 1927). The graves of Morgan and of her mixed-blood child are side-by-side in the Delphos cemetery; see Delphos tourism website, http://www.skyways.org/towns/Delphos/our_history/anna_brewster_morgan.html. Stories of her captivity and many others are compiled in Gregory Michno and Susan Michno, *A Fate Worse Than Death: Indian Captivities in the West, 1830-1885* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2007).

13. Stuart Henry, *Conquering Our Great American Plains: A Historical Development* (New York: 1930); see also Thomas D. Isern, "Theodore C. Henry: Frontier Booster and Nostalgic Old Settler," in *John Brown to Bob Dole*, 81-90. Elmer E. Blackman, "Sherman County and the H.U.A.," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1903-1904 8 (1904): 50-62, quotation 51; J. S. Painter, "Southwest Kansas," *Kansas Historical Society* 4 (1888): 281-82. A good survey of county seat wars in western Kansas is Robert K. DeArment, *Ballots and Bullets: The Bloody County Seat Wars of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

most tellers of the frontier story counted the experience worth the cost in the end.¹⁴

In telling the frontier story it was important to include women's contributions, although their narrative role was limited by gender expectations. The symbol of long-suffering feminine contributions to life in a hard land was the sunbonnet. "Imagine the pioneer woman without a sunbonnet!" exclaimed a writer in *Jayhawk* magazine in 1929. "The pioneer woman put on a sunbonnet every time she left the house. . . . Every woman and little girl had at least three—one for every day, one for second best and one for Sunday-best." However sturdy the pioneer mother—such as the Madonna of the Trail emplaced in Council Grove by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1928—she had to wear a sunbonnet. In 1981 Joanna Stratton would publish, under the title *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Prairie*, a stirring collection of women's stories assembled in the 1920s by her great-grandmother, Lilla Day Monroe. On the cover appeared a woman wheeling a barrow of cow chips she had gathered for fuel—and she was wearing a sunbonnet.¹⁵

If white, English-speaking women played essential, but circumscribed roles in the frontier saga, certain others were simply excluded from the story. The *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society* reveal almost no participation by persons with identifiably ethnic names through the early decades of the twentieth century. In fact, in 1888, when Pastor Carl Aaron Swensson, founder of Bethany College, presented a paper to the KSHS, he felt he had to defend his people, the Swedish immigrants of central Kansas, against disparagements. "The discussion of the foreign immigration question is too indiscriminate, I think," Swensson argued, because the true "natives" of the land were now in the Indian Territory. "Take the Swedes, for instance," the reverend continued, warming to his subject. "They have converted wastes and deserts into the finest agricultural districts imaginable. Have you ever heard of a Swedish anarchist, communist, or nihilist? No, we are not made that way; we come from a free and noble people, and our history as a free people dates back at least to the beginning of the Christian era."¹⁶

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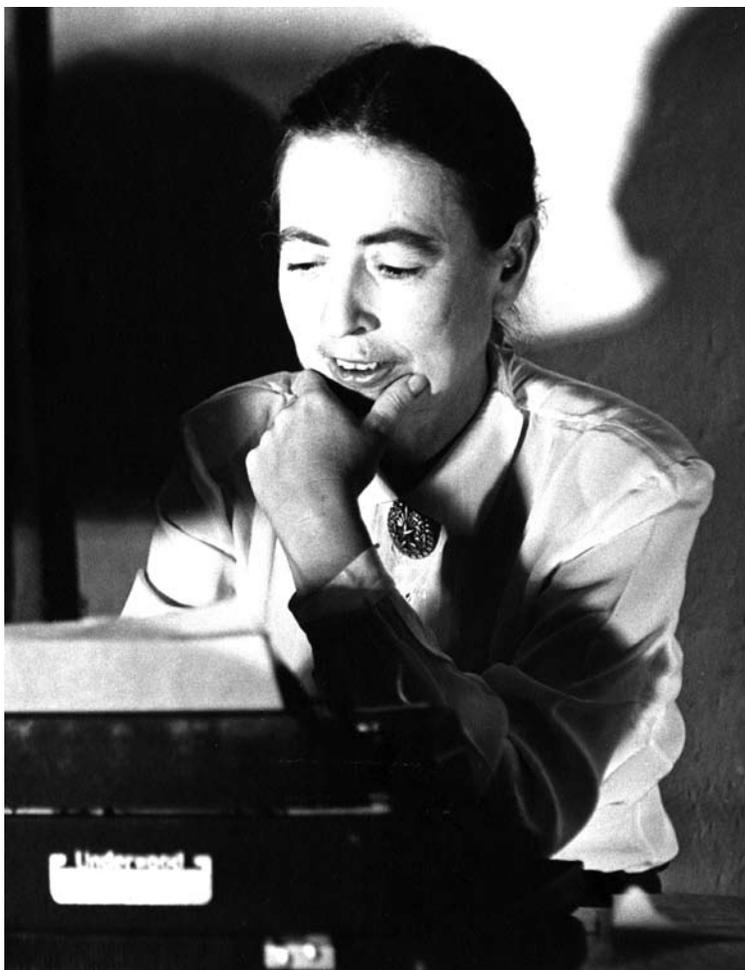
14. John Ise, *Sod and Stubble* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1936); John Ise, with additional material by Von Rothenberger, *Sod and Stubble: The Unabridged and Annotated Edition* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); Richard B. Sheridan, "John Ise, 1885–1969, Economist, Conservationist, Prophet of the Energy Crisis," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 5 (Summer 1982): 83–106.

15. Jessie Owen Small, "Sunbonnets and Pioneer Women," *Jayhawk* 2 (February 1929): 50. For a historian's critique of the sunbonnet stereotype, see Glenda Riley, "Kansas Frontierswomen Viewed through Their Writings," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 9 (Spring 1986): 2–9; "The Madonna of the Trail," *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* 63 (July 1929): 399–404; "History of Madonna," *Kansas Federation Magazine*, January 1929, Morris County Clippings 2 (1934–1962), Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; Joanna Stratton, *Pioneer Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981); and "'Cow Chip' Photograph Subject Now Identified," *Mirror*, Kansas State Historical Society Newsletter, 32 (May 1986): 1, 2, for story on Kansas Historical Society staff identification of that woman as Ada McColl, a pioneer near Lakin in the 1890s.

16. C. A. Swensson, "The Swedes in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1886–1888* 4 (1888): 287–88.

Women, too, including Anglo-American women, were largely absent from the transactions of the state historical society, and thus not contributing to this mainstream manufactory of state history. Heritage-minded women were expected to participate instead in the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), which itself made significant contributions to state history. The DAR, for instance, undertook and accomplished the marking of the Santa Fe Trail and was influential in the preservation of Pawnee Rock. Zu Adams, daughter of the first secretary of the KSHS, served the society loyally for more than thirty-five years, first as her father's unpaid assistant, then as salaried librarian. She also wrote a lucid and charming account of the marking of the Santa Fe Trail for the report of the KSHS. She participated in that work, however, as a member of the DAR.¹⁷

Women thus were restricted in the forging of the frontier story, non-Anglo-Americans were left out, and certain other groups were carefully confined to supporting roles in the narrative. The Spanish, for instance, who explored the central plains long before the arrival of Anglo-Americans, had to be fitted in carefully. Such leaders as De Soto and Coronado were heroic, wrote Cottonwood Falls attorney John Madden, but they were impractical. The French were good at dealing with the natives, but they were dilettantes. "The Spaniard and the Frenchman came and passed away," Madden concluded, but "the American pioneer . . . settled down upon the plains." W. E. Richey of Harveyville, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, now settled in as a county superintendent of schools, also was intrigued by the Spanish presence, and fascinated by a Spanish artifact, the Juan Gallego saber plowed up near Cimarron in 1886. The sword bears the legend, "No me saques sin razon / No me enbaines sin honor," meaning, "Do not draw me without reason, or sheath me without honor." Richey was certain an officer named Juan Gallego with the Coronado expedition in 1541 had dropped the sword on the plains. (Subsequent tests would show, alas, that the steel in the piece was eighteenth-century Toledo steel, not sixteenth-century.) The Spanish conquistadors, Richey allows, were



*Alice Nichols put the journalism degree she earned from Kansas State in 1927 to a wide variety of uses, as a writer and editor for a host of publications, a playwright, and a children's book editor. One of her own works, *Bleeding Kansas* published in 1954, was written at a time when revisionist historians were beginning to critically examine and systematically undermine the old free-state narrative. Nichols's work was a landmark in that process and is still considered one of the finest books ever written about Civil War Kansas. Photograph courtesy of the Alice C. Nichols Papers, Morse Department of Special Collections, Hale Library, Kansas State University, Manhattan.*

17. Amanda Laugesen, "Making a Unique Heritage: Celebrating Pike's Pawnee Village and the Santa Fe Trail, 1900–1918," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 23 (Autumn 2000): 172–85; Mrs. T. A. Cordry, *The Story of the Marking of the Santa Fe Trail* (Topeka: Crane & Co., 1915); Zu Adams Collection, 1872–1911, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, finding aid at <http://www.kshs.org/p/zu-adams-collection/13971>; "In Memoriam: Miss Zu Adams, Late Librarian of the Kansas State Historical Society," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1911–1912* 12 (1912): 21–27; Zu Adams, "The Marking of the Santa Fe Trail," *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the Board of Directors of the Kansas State Historical Society* (1904–1906): 74–77.

SOD AND STUBBLE



JOHN ISE

Woodcuts by Howard Simon

Surely the greatest of all memoirs of frontier hardship is the classic Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Homestead, by John Ise. After growing up on a homestead near Downs, Ise went on to a distinguished academic career as a natural resource economist at the University of Kansas. In Ise's memory, his family works hard and suffers mightily, and his recollections of his family's difficulties offer a firsthand portrait of one moment in the life of the state.

forward, in an article for *Woman's Home Companion*. The article, titled "A Visit to Sod-House Land," explained that although sod houses were a great symbol of the frontier, they were merely a "creation of necessity." Now, Harger declared, "The old sod house stands back for a stable, and its glory is departed. With the frame structure the very height of prairie competence has been reached!" A few years later William Connelley, secretary of the KSHS, allowed that there might be a few soddies still standing, but only in the wilder western reaches of the state. These obituaries for sod houses were premature, as many still stood and served, happily occupied by residents long into the twentieth century, but the point of Harger and

noble knights whose "armor glittered" across the plains, but they did not stick and stay in the manner of folk with surnames like Madden or Richey.¹⁸

The Spanish, historically, were finished for good with the dedication of the Pike Pawnee village on the Republican River in 1906. This was the place, officials of the KSHS believed when they took title to it, where the American explorer Zebulon Pike, on conclusion of a visit with the Republican Pawnee, had stood down a challenge by these earthlodge dwellers, who had been incited by the Spanish to make trouble for the Americans. Indeed, Pike had insisted the Pawnee take down a Spanish flag, symbol of the decrepit Spanish empire, and replace it with the stars and stripes, ensign of the virile American republic. Recall that the American defeat of the Spanish in the Spanish-American War had preceded dedication of the Pike Pawnee village site by only eight years. The keynote speaker for the dedication ceremony was John B. Dunbar, addressing the topic, "The White Man's Foot in Kansas." He made it plain that Pike's actions on the site symbolized the passing of an old empire and the rise of a new, and by the way also put the Indians in their historic place, too. The Pawnee, as he described them, were noble and talented savages, but they were savages, who could not stand against a determined band of Anglo-Americans. Dunbar made it clear who must emerge victorious in any such contest on the frontier.¹⁹

By the early twentieth century, too, the mythistory of the frontier was transforming itself into the related, but more modern, myth of progress. In 1904, for instance, the upstanding progressive editor from Abilene, Charles M. Harger, looked backward, then

18. John Madden, "Wardens of the Marches," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1901-1902 7 (1902): 40-46, quotation 46; W. E. Richey, "Early Spanish Explorations and Indian Implements in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1903-1904 8 (1904): 152-68.

19. John B. Dunbar, "The White Man's Foot in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1907-1908 10 (1908): 54-98. See also Laugesen, "Making a Unique Heritage," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 23 (Autumn 2000): 172-85.

Connelley was that the frontier experience had led seamlessly to modern progress. Frontier history had brought us to our high, modern state.²⁰

These makers of mythistory were ready by the early twentieth century to declare victory even over the stubborn land, the Great American Desert. F. D. Coburn, journalist and then secretary of the state board of agriculture, instructed journalists to stop talking about blizzard and drought and grasshoppers, for the country had improved. Connelley went further and denied the desert altogether, saying “it never did exist in the territory composing Kansas.” In 1926 two song writers from Topeka published the triumphal song, “The Great American Desert,” which recounted how the Kansas desert, once the resort of buffalo and red men, had been transmogrified into “fields of golden grain” interspersed with “stately trees.”²¹

The declaration of victory over the desert was premature. Kansas was sorely tested by the Dust Bowl, simultaneous with the Great Depression, and after that by the Second World War. Such traumatic events knocked the sunny, self-congratulatory tone out of the historical discourse of the Sunflower State. The result was, first, a new defensiveness preoccupied with the image of the state rather than its substance. Robert Smith Bader would chronicle this posture in *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas*. “No state in the Union,” he began, “struggles more self-consciously with its image than Kansas.” Whereas Kansans of earlier generations saw their state as central to the fate of the republic and a leader in reform, those of the mid-twentieth century chafed under the burden of an image as a stodgy hinterland. Whereas the earlier history of Kansas had been poetry, said Milton S. Eisenhower, president of Kansas Agricultural College, that of the mid-twentieth century had become “pedestrian prose.” Kansans, said Kenneth Davis, because of their “timid conformism” had “ceased to command a national respect” and acquired an “almost impenetrable crust of mediocrity.” It is possible to make too much of this navel-gazing, however, for commentators across the country were decrying conformity, mediocrity, and philistinism. This was the era, after all, of the *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, *The Organization Man*, and *The Lonely Crowd*.²² With its negative image, Kansas may only have been, as Carl Becker might have said, America double distilled once again.

Rather, far more important to the historical understanding and characterization of Kansas were certain more quiet and deliberate trends, the

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20. Charles Moreau Harger, “A Visit to Sod-House Land,” *Woman’s Home Companion* 31 (November 1904): 10, 60; Connelley comments in *Topeka Journal*, November, 20, 1915, Kansas Description Clippings, Vol. 1 (1872–1930), Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; *Western Times*, December 14, 1950, Wallace County Clippings, Vol. 1 (1870–1961), Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

21. F. D. Coburn, *A Protest Against the Fake*, [1907], Climate and Meteorology Pamphlets, Vol. 1, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans* (Chicago, Ill.: Lewis Pub. Co., 1918), 1:83; Della Dillon Crawford and Hattie N. Blackhart, *The Great American Desert* (sheet music for voice and piano, Topeka: Della Dillon Crawford, 1926).

22. Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), quotations ix, 95, 96; Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955); William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study in the Changing American Character* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950).

Simplified, unifying themes—such as the battleground of freedom, or the settlement of the frontier—would give way in time to more diverse and critical treatments.

first of which was its institutionalization as a subject of formal study. In 1957 the University of Oklahoma Press published *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State*, by William Zornow. For the first time the state possessed a textbook suitable for college study, which is to say, Kansas history had won acceptance as a serious subject. Zornow was followed by Robert W. Richmond, who published *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* in 1974.²³

These excellent survey texts were possible, too, because of another development: the intellectual elevation of state history, thus providing the basis for informed synthesis. The Kansas State Historical Society remained, and remains, an organization of amateurs—that is, dedicated citizens with interest, expertise, and love for history—but in the mid-twentieth century they set about professionalization of institutional operations and, of specific concern here, the imposition of scholarly standards for research and writing in their publications. Thus the society, which had published its *Transactions* from 1875 to 1908 and its *Collections* from 1909 to 1928, commenced publishing the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* in 1933, prefacing it with the statement, “Every effort will be made to secure articles that are historically sound as well as interesting in style and subject.” This meant an ever-increasing scrutiny of scholarship and annotation and an implementation of peer review that continued through the transition to the new format of the quarterly as *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* in 1978. The society today openly boasts, “You’ll find the latest in Kansas scholarship in *Kansas History*.”²⁴

It was William McNeill, the world historian, who so aptly described the evolution of historical consciousness and writing in a developing commonwealth such as the state of Kansas. Simplified, unifying themes—such as the battleground of freedom, or the settlement of the frontier—would give way in time to more diverse and critical treatments, to “more subtly modulated portraits of successes and failures.” Study the tables of contents of the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* and *Kansas History* from 1933 to present, sample the articles, and observe therein exactly the sort of transition characterized by McNeill—as well as an inexorable elevation of the quality of content.²⁵

The incremental accumulation and revision of historical knowledge provided by these and other journals, moreover, is the basis for ever-more-ambitious synthesis. An example of multi-author synthesis is *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, edited by Virgil Dean and published in 2006. An exemplar of single-author synthesis is Craig Miner’s masterly state history, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000*, published by the University Press of Kansas in 2002. Neither the gallery of biography edited by Dean nor the general exposition authored by Miner would have been possible in the first decade of the twenty-first century had

23. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (Saint Charles, Mo.: Forum Press, 1974).

24. Introduction to first issue, November 1931, posted by the KSHS at <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly-introduction-november-1931/12526>; home page of *Kansas History*, <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-history/12443>.

25. Convenient online entry to the two publications is available at <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly/13286> and <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-history-articles-online/12445>.

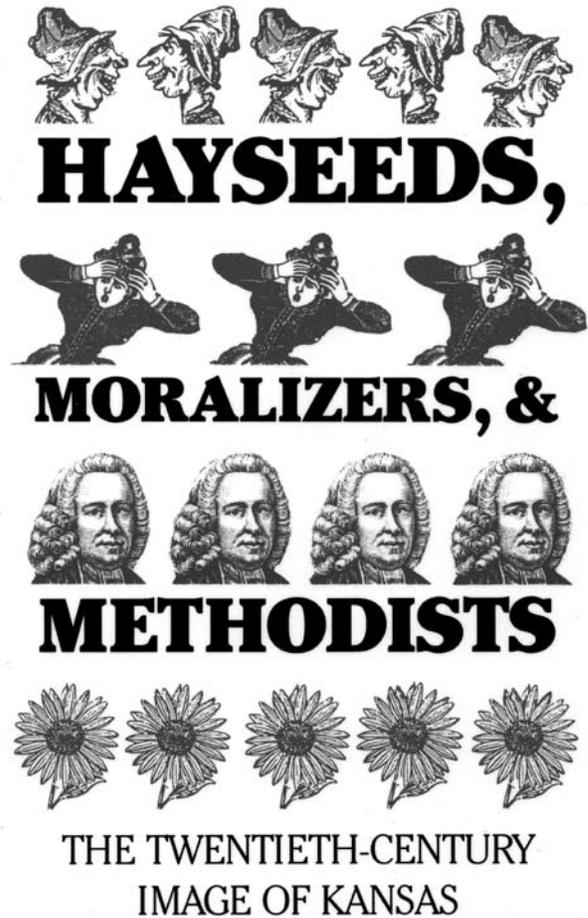
it not been for the reliable and inspirational spadework done by historians over the past seventy years.

This is not to say that Kansas history, or the historical storytelling described by Carl Becker, has become the province purely of professional scholars, for as Becker reminded us, every man (if we forgive him his gender-specificity) is his own historian. Two other trends in mythistory have gone on contemporaneously with the scholarly evolution just described. One of these is the commodification of history, often in pursuit of profits from heritage tourism. Examples include the redevelopment of Lindsborg, previously a country town that happened to possess extraordinary attainments in the arts, as a Swedish tourist attraction, commencing with the first Hyllnings Fest in 1941 and continuing with the makeover of the downtown in faux-Scandinavian design. The parallel redevelopment of Front Street and Boot Hill as cow town attractions in Dodge City commenced in 1929 with the installation of a bogus Boot Hill cemetery for the entertainment of visiting members of the Rotary. It quickened with the popularity of *Wyatt Earp* and *Gunsmoke* on network television in the 1950s, generating sufficient cow town mythistory that Senator Andrew Schoepel, arguing for a Kansas commemorative coin, made the case that the state should be remembered as the home of “Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, and Matt Dillon”—thereby conflating historically verifiable figures with the Dodge City marshal played by James Arness on TV.²⁶

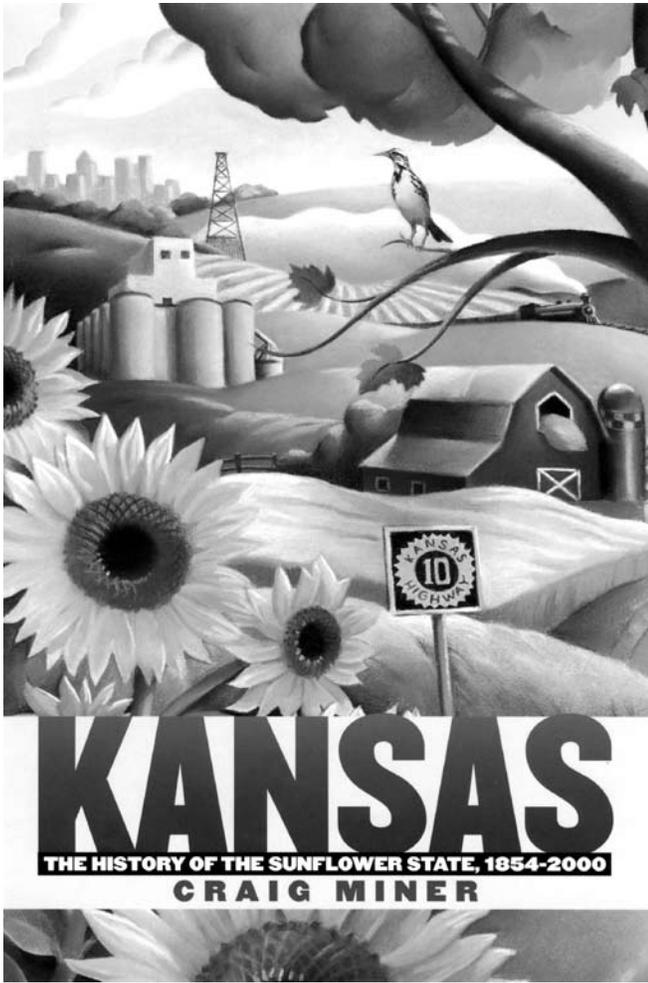
Commodified history can be great fun, but more affecting are the persistent and pure historical interests of Kansans at the grassroots who are sometimes derogated by academics as antiquarians but deserve to be honored and cherished as amateurs. Of a summer night, motor past the neon red signage into the Kanopolis Drive-In, where Liz and Irene, the daughters of Tony Blazina, operate the establishment as an homage to their late father. Tony, a World War II veteran, worked in the salt mines until he got laid off and opened his drive-in in 1952. He “had a passion for movies,” says Liz. “I feel his spirit. We do this just to keep the tradition going.”

Tony screened his first drive-in movie, *The Red Stallion*, in the year of my birth. Back on home ground, I think of our old neighbor, Ralph Hathaway, self-appointed curator of the Santa Fe Trail track across his

26. Larry Danielson, “Public Swedish-American Ethnicity in Central Kansas: A Festival and Its Functions,” *Swedish Pioneer* 25 (January 1974): 13–36; Kevin Britz, “Dodge City’s and Deadwood Cemeteries,” paper presented at Third Annual Deadwood Historic Preservation Symposium, Deadwood, South Dakota, April 2, 2005; *Topeka Journal*, August 25, 1959, Kansas Comments and Anecdotes Clippings, Vol. 1, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; *Wichita Eagle Magazine*, September 13, 1959, Kansas Comments and Anecdotes Clippings, Vol. 1, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; Nyle Miller, “Kansas Cowtown Marshals Before TV,” *History News* 13 (January 1958): 18–19.



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Craig Miner's masterly presentation of the state's history, Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000, published by the University Press of Kansas in 2002, would not have been possible in the first decade of the twenty-first century had it not been for the reliable and inspirational spadework done by historians over the past seventy years.

home pasture in Rice County known as Ralph's Ruts. How he delighted in escorting visitors onto what was, to him, hallowed ground, and telling them stories of the old trail. Every time the highway department took down his unauthorized "Ralph's Ruts" sign along Highway 56, he waited a little while, then put it back up again. Sometimes, as I think about old keepers of historical flames I have known, I take down the saber my great-grandfather carried west from service in the Third Illinois Cavalry, or I get out the ballad book of my grandmother Meta, the hand-written composition book containing the songs she learned as a girl on the farm in Barton County, from which I still sometimes sing. "A Farmer's Son Am I," I read, and after that, "Hello Central, Give Me Heaven."

This essay has now become sentimental. Good history does require love, however, and so let it end here.

The most memorable and haunting image in all that esoteric branch of letters we call the philosophy of history comes to us from Walter Benjamin, a German, Jewish, Marxist scholar who died in 1940 while fleeing Nazi persecution. The image derives from an ink drawing made by the artist Paul Klee and owned by Benjamin. Contemplating the piece, Benjamin reimagines the staring, open-mouthed abstract angel as the Angel of History. "There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*," Benjamin writes.

His face is turned to the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.

Benjamin's Angel of History is almost always misinterpreted. Commentators commonly consider the angel to be a metaphor for the historian, or for the practice of history. The Angel of History is not a metaphor, however. He is an angel, a teaching angel who instructs us solely in the impossibility of restoring that which is past. It is no angel who extracts patterns and narratives from the debris and forms up the stories we live by. That task falls to us all-too-human historians, we who look backward with the Angel of History, not with his distraught gaze, but rather with the searching eye for salvage. This salvage operation is

the enterprise of Kansas history. Today we reflect upon our 150 years of statehood, but we also turn forward, carrying a legacy in our arms.²⁷

There is a story that my grandfather told me about the day a tornado devastated Greensburg, Kansas—November 12, 1916. After the storm had swept through in the early morning, citizens beheld the form and face of an angel in the clouds. A photographer snapped a photograph of the apparition, which he offered for public sale as a postcard and in a booklet. Prints of the postcard are on sale still. On May 4, 2007, an even more destructive tornado struck Greensburg, killing eleven citizens. Soldiers and neighbors soon arrived to render assistance and clean up the wreckage. Greensburgians Bob and Ann Dixson, although no longer young, chose to rebuild and cast their lot looking forward with their town. Seeing some aesthetic potential in a wind-stripped stump in her yard, Ann called in a chainsaw artist to fashion something from it. She was pleased with the product: a six-foot wooden angel.²⁸ KH

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27. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 389–400, quotation 392; my reading of the Angel of History is influenced by the remarks published by Sasha H. Sternberg, <http://ahsasha.com/theory/my-library/3783873>.

28. Postcards of the 1916 photograph of the Greensburg angel are still found in souvenir shops, and the 1917 booklet, *Angel Over Greensburg*, copyright W. A. Sinkler, appears occasionally listed by online vendors; *Wichita Eagle*, May 4, 2008, online at <http://www.kansas.com/2008/05/04/393186/construction-costs-drive-more.html>.