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Review of *The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape* by Charles Barron McIntosh

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The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape. Charles Barron McIntosh. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. xiv+266 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, and index. \$65.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8032-3184-9).

This is a remarkable volume. The ninety-first of 107 figures is a good example of what makes this book so remarkable. Figure 91 has a baker's dozen (13) small hand-drawn sketches that show how different landowners went back to the land office and claimed an additional 480 acres (Kincaid additions) to expand their 160-acre homesteads into units that might be more viable in the semi-arid climate of central Nebraska. These 13 examples come from ten different counties, which sprawl over an area larger than three of the original 13 colonies (as illustrated in Figure 1, which goes the extra step of superimposing New England state borders on a standard Nebraska location map to give a subtle but welcomed increase in perspective). The other 105 maps are equivalently meticulous illustrations of topography, vegetation, projectile-point discoveries, journal entries, military expeditions, treaty cessions, cattle drives, land claims (under a bewildering variety of Federal and state laws), lake water chemistry, land frauds, ethnic clusters, and claim abandonments. The prose that ties these extraordinary maps together is replete with trenchant vignettes about surveyor's errors that are "evident" in some apparently mistaken land claims, settlers' perceptions of topographic sites, the architectural advantages of baled-hay houses, and the many ways

in which frontier entrepreneurs were able to bend laws to accomplish goals that few in Washington or Lincoln seem to have conceived as either feasible or desirable. Woven through the maps and prose is a third parallel strand, a series of small bibliographic inserts that describe stages in the lives of a few key players who walked various parts of this huge stage while history swirled through the region.

When one views a finished volume, the story often seems so logical and complete that it is easy to miss all the blind alleys, the painstaking hours in county archives, the miles of travel, and the inevitable hours of spellbound reading of century-old newspapers that grab your attention but have little chance of getting into a tightly woven narrative. In short, the real story of this book is not just the remarkable maps or the rich prose—it is also the order of magnitude of additional work that was needed to find the examples and anecdotes that help tell the story so compellingly. For example, McIntosh describes a cluster of claims by Jewish people. On the map showing where these people claimed land, he adds a shaded pattern to show how those claims relate to earlier claims by a different group (which in turn were related to topography in a meaningful way). And, in your soul, you *know* that he chose to map that particular set of claims after sketching similar maps of perhaps a handful, perhaps a dozen, perhaps a score of similar groups. Knowing about all the maps you do not see, in turn, makes the maps you do see seem even more remarkable.

American geography would be in far better shape, both substantively and budgetarily, if about thirty of the self-appointed and highly rewarded theoreticians of the discipline had the inner discipline to do even a small percentage of what McIntosh has done for his adopted region. The case for geography's relevance would still not be proved—we would need people with pushier personalities to assert that this is precisely the kind of dense background about spatial patterns that is needed to help us craft policies appropriate for each region. Conceding that we need more than just a few dozen books of this kind, however, does not negate the fact that it would be mighty nice to have dozens of these treasures to cite, instead of the mere handful that we have.

It is a shame that books of this kind are so rare in our discipline today, but for the past week I have had little difficulty suppressing the shame and reveling in the sheer joy of reading every page and studying every map of this book. McIntosh has crafted a great study, and has candidly exposed the results of his scholarship for scrutiny. There are a few errors but they

constitute such a tiny fraction of such a rich whole that they pale into insignificance. **Philip J. Gersmehl**, *University of Minnesota*