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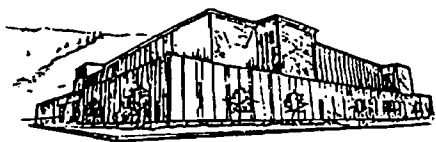
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*Social and Cultural Themes in Late Nineteenth Century Central Great Plains  
Railroad Literature*

by

Brenda Moor

B.A., Doane College, 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

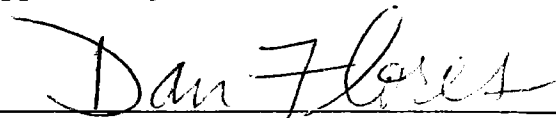
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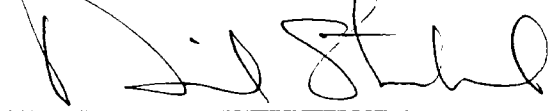
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Social and Cultural Themes in Late Nineteenth Century Central Great Plains Railroad Literature

Director: Dan Flores



Post-Civil War railroad literature, in its attempts to attract settlers to the central Great Plains, reflects much of nineteenth century American thought. Such thought is evident through the railroads' use of desert, health, and civilization imagery in its portrayal of the central Plains states of Kansas and Nebraska. With their exaggerated claims directed at potential settlers, railroads exemplified a competitive drive for corporate profit. The consequences of their campaign for development of the central Plains still affect this region today, for it suffers from environmental degradation, economic stress, and depopulation as a result of agricultural settlement begun in the late 1800s.

The desert image played a significant role in railroad advertising. While belief in the Great Plains desert waned in the late 1800s, I contend in chapter one that the desert image, damaging to western land sales, still exerted enough influence to warrant railroad companies' refutation of it. However, I also argue that, paradoxically, the railroad companies claimed a desert existed in order to use the desert image as a marketing tool. Such a strategy aimed at appealing to pride in prospective settlers by challenging them to come west and prove their hardiness through taming the central Plains desert.

The second chapter deals with nineteenth century thought on health and how railroad advertising incorporated it into their promotional literature. Such material reflected their competition for settlers with the Southwest, a region famous for its rejuvenating climate, and with popular health and vacation resorts such as those in Colorado.

Chapter three illustrates ways in which railroads attempted to attract settlers by claiming civilization, comparable with that of the eastern United States, existed on the central Plains. Companies also employed environmental determinist theories, such as those postulated by William Gilpin, that showed Kansas and Nebraska inheriting cultural and commercial prosperity owing to their latitudinal and central geographical positions.

This thesis will be of interest to western American historians, environmental historians, and social and cultural scholars of nineteenth century United States history.

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## *Introduction*

Twentieth century Americans witnessed monumental changes in transportation on a scale never before seen in the history of any country. Railroads that had so revolutionized and dominated the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth eventually gave way to the automobile and the airplane. Trains took a back seat as Americans became caught up in a love affair with the personal convenience of cars and the speed and birds'-eye view afforded by air travel.

To be sure, travel and transport by train is still vital to much of America. But yet for the descendants of those nineteenth century Great Plains settlers who depended on it for much of their livelihood, the railroad has diminished in everyday importance. Trains in the rural West generally do not provide public transportation as they once did. Their significance lies more in shipping goods and agricultural commodities; therefore they can be easily ignored in the day-to-day affairs of the average Great Plains dweller.

Sometimes the only jarring reminder of their presence occurs when a train blocks the streets connecting one side of town to another, or when its mournful whistle demands notice as it intrudes on a late night stillness that envelopes small, depopulating communities dotting the Plains countryside.



That whistle, however, meant much more to Great Plains inhabitants bent on opening up a new country well over one hundred years ago. Railroads brought many settlers and supplies out to places like Kansas and Nebraska, and they provided the means to haul grain to commercial markets. For some, the railroads also provided the fastest way out of a country that tried the patience and stamina of every settler. For a variety of reasons, the early settlers' survival hinged on the roads' existence in a way that does not resonate for their descendants generations later.

A great deal has been written about railroad history east and west of the Missouri River, as railroads played a dominant role in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American social, political, and economic history. Less prevalent, however, are works specifically on railroad promotional publications. Such material deserves attention, for it provides significant insight into what drew emigrants to states that were distant for many and challenging for virtually all. Railroad literature also reveals much about nineteenth century American thought. Many cultural beliefs, especially in connection with Americans' obsession with Manifest Destiny on a local, national, and even international level, are easily discernible in late nineteenth century railroad publications. The railroads' role in developing the West was just a part of the overall picture of American expansionism and nationalization.<sup>1</sup> Railroad literature also reflects corporate manipulation paralleled today by innumerable companies pushing their products by emphasizing youth, physical beauty, sexual appeal, and adventure. The post-Civil War period saw railroads earnestly promoting the advantages of taking up land from the

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<sup>1</sup> For a more thorough discussion of social and political motives for developing the Great Plains region, see David M. Emmons, "The Influence of Ideology on Changing Environmental Images: The Case of Six

millions of acres available beyond the Missouri. Their immediate goal was to turn a handsome profit, but their long range result effected a complete transformation of the Great Plains environment that produced both boom and bust periods for farmers and ranchers. The boom periods, however, have benefited fewer and fewer small farmers over the years, and their future looks much less bright than that projected by the railroads nearly a century and a half ago. Agricultural development as fostered by such entities as the railroads in the late 1800s created the foundation for economic problems, depopulation, and environmental degradation of the Great Plains region by the end of the next century.

This study looks specifically at post-Civil War railroad literature of the central Great Plains, mainly concerning the states of Kansas and Nebraska,<sup>2</sup> and the examples I use come from twenty-three different pamphlets, brochures, or books found in the Nebraska and Kansas State Historical Societies. As these states were not generally part of the areas out West that railroad companies advertised as vacation or resort destinations, this paper focuses on other and more significant aspects of railroad promotionals, specifically that of attracting settlers to the central Great Plains. It utilizes only English publications, which limits the scope of study to some degree, although English speakers constituted the largest linguistic group of emigrants. The census from 1870 lists more than 316,000 native born Americans in Kansas, with over 48,000 foreign born. The ratio was smaller for Nebraska, but natives still dominated at more than 92,000 in the same year, with

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Gazetteers," in *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement*, Brian W. Blouet and Merlin P. Lawson, eds. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975): 125-136.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I include all of Kansas and Nebraska in the designation "central Plains," despite the difference in topography and rainfall found between the eastern and western regions of each state. For an argument that the dividing line between the eastern prairies and the western Plains of the United States

approximately 31,000 foreign born residents. The 1890 census reports Kansas' total native born population as exceeding 1,279,000, while the foreign born population registers nearly 148,000. Nebraska's natives came in at more than 856,000, and its foreign born comprised around 202,500 people.<sup>3</sup>

My study and use of central Plains railroad promotionals differs from other studies that have used such material because of its detailed focus on the themes discussed below. Research that has already been done only touches on the general themes I cover and provides no detailed background on their relation to nineteenth century thought. More research on railroad literature could yet be done, focusing specifically on non-English promotionals, for example, or on the individual writers of these brochures and books. Such studies could further our understanding of what influenced emigrants to settle on the central Plains.

The themes I have chosen are linked by their grounding in important aspects of nineteenth century social and cultural thought, and all themes either emphasize or downplay desert characteristics of the central Plains, depending on what element suited promoters' perceived need at the time.

In this paper I consider the railroads' use of the desert image as a means to draw settlers to the central Plains. I also discuss their claim for a salubrious Kansas and Nebraska climate, and the contention that these states possessed sophistication with destinies set to ensure commercial and cultural prominence.

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runs along the ninety-eighth meridian, cutting through the eastern portion of Kansas and Nebraska, see Walter Prescott Webb's classic *The Great Plains*.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Office, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States, . . .*, Ninth Census, (June 1, 1870), vol. I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872): 310, 316; U.S. Census Office, Department

The first chapter examines the use of the desert image in railroad literature of the central Great Plains. After a brief outline of the background behind the Great Plains' traditional designation as the "Great American Desert," I examine the desert image in not only railroad promotional publications, but also in a variety of contemporary sources. Framing the discussion within the context of opposing arguments presented by historians David Emmons in *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains*, written in 1971, and B.H. Baltensperger in "Plains Boomers and the Creation of the Great American Desert Myth," written two decades later, I argue that railroad promoters invoked the desert image to prove the falseness of any public belief in such a damaging view of the central Plains, while simultaneously making the contradictory claim that desert conditions had been and can be overcome. This conquering of the desert, however, could only be achieved by the efforts of a special class of heroic settlers willing to shoulder the burdens of taming a difficult land. Such an appeal was aimed at arousing feelings of pride in potential emigrants and challenging them to prove their hardiness by settling in this new section of the country.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter two focuses on the railroads' claim that Kansas and Nebraska enjoyed a temperate, salubrious climate in which the ill and infirm could recuperate and find renewed vigor. After a general background discussion of nineteenth century beliefs about causes and cures for diseases and illnesses, with particular attention paid to tuberculosis, I show that central Plains railroad officials believed they had to compete with the influx of

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of the Interior, *Compendium of the Eleventh Census: 1890, Part I – Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892): 486, 496.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971): 5; B.H. Baltensperger, "Plains Boomers and the Creation of the Great American Desert Myth" *Journal of Historical Geography* 18:1 (January 1992): 60.

settlers continually heading to the Southwest due to its renown for having a healthy climate. The pitch railroads made for a rejuvenating Kansas and Nebraska climate pervades much of their literature and reflects contemporary thinking on issues of disease and health.

The final chapter examines various means railroad companies used to demonstrate the admirable, if not at times superior, educational and cultural society they claimed for the central Plains. Companies, in an attempt to appeal to women and family men, wanted to show that Kansas and Nebraska settlements had much the same culture and advantages as older communities back East, and that some areas of these states were destined for greatness. In so doing they borrowed from geographical determinist theories such as those espoused by famed Western booster William Gilpin. In a closely related theme, railroads also made reference to the inevitable march of “civilization” making its way across the Plains. “Inferior” Plains inhabitants like the Indians faced either extermination or assimilation under such an unstoppable force, which allowed white settlers an easier opportunity to make a home on the Plains and enjoy its sophisticated benefits.

The images of desert, garden, health, and civilization were presented by railroad companies with the hope that prospective emigrants would find any or all of these images sufficiently appealing to become central Plains land owners reliant on railroads.

## *Chapter One:*

### **Taming a Desert That Wasn't There: Paradoxical Use of the Desert Image**

In the mid-1990s, I accepted an offer to teach conversational English in Japan. With this chance to work and live abroad, I had my first real opportunity to get a view of America from a foreign perspective. Some perceptions of the United States became clear through questions asked of me. “Do all Americans have guns?” queried one acquaintance. “Do Americans play bingo every night?” inquired a high school teacher under the influence of some Hollywood movie.

The most surprising question I addressed came from a junior high teacher in a school located on the tip of a narrow strip of land jutting out into the Pacific Ocean. I don't know if this relative isolation had any effect on his knowledge of the United States, but one day this sensei asked me if a person can see the outlines of individual American states from the air. Certainly in all my trips flying over America, never once have I looked out the window and discovered a huge square box, for instance, indicating that our plane was now over Wyoming, nor have I ever discerned the shape of a long, very thin rectangle revealing that we had entered the air space of Idaho's panhandle. Armed with these personal experiences and at least a smidgen of common sense, I confidently assured him, albeit with a bemused smile, that American states do not have any visible physical borders.

Having put the matter to rest, or so I thought, I later asked him where he had learned such a thing. I found out his “information” came from some book. But this later questioning of his source on my part seemed to lead him to suspect that perhaps I wasn’t so sure after all about the nonexistence of visible state boundaries. Judging by the look on his face, he now seemed to doubt my answer to his question. I sensed that he still clung to his extremely misguided belief and that I had failed to set him straight.

This story illustrates that images, no matter how misinformed, can be difficult to erase. Everyone has them of something, someone, or someplace, for whatever reason. The Great Plains states have been and continue to be a source for erroneous, if not absurd, notions. Witness the infamous “jackalopes” that can be seen in tourist traps from South Dakota to Texas. Or consider a friend of mine in Washington State who believed that in my childhood in Nebraska, no curling irons could be found, so we had to wrap tin foil around corn cobs, heat them in the stove, then roll them up in our hair. And of course, some Americans yet believe that dangerous Indians still roam the wild West and that the horse remains a common mode of transportation.

One image, however, has been part of Great Plains history for nearly five centuries – that of the desert. This chapter briefly outlines a general background of the Plains’ desert image and then explores the use of the desert theme in late nineteenth century railroad literature of the central Great Plains,<sup>1</sup> demonstrating that railroad companies used the image in order to refute the existence of a desert. At the same time, the railroads used the image as a marketing strategy by appealing to potential settlers’ courage and hardiness in the challenge to conquer the desert.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general overview on railroad advertising of Nebraska land, see Helen Marie Anderson, “The Influence of Railway Advertising upon the Settlement of Nebraska” (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1926): 19-44.

First, however, is the Great Plains region a desert? Eastern portions, such as those in Nebraska and Kansas, have little to no characteristics that point to a desert. However, the vast western region, according to Walter Prescott Webb, suffers from “a deficiency in the most essential climatic element – water.” Over much of the Great Plains, rainfall amounts to less than twenty, fifteen, or even ten inches yearly, while the “true desert” portion of the Great Plains gets around five inches. Westernmost sections of the central Plains receive ten to twenty inches annually, and “it is generally agreed that wherever precipitation is less than twenty inches the climate is deficient.” In addition, roughly the western half of Kansas and the western two-thirds of Nebraska have a greater evaporation rate of moisture during the warmer months than the eastern portions. Thus, to a limited degree, parts of the Plains have at least some inclination toward desert characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

This desert image has a fairly complex relationship with the Plains, at times competing with a garden image, and at other times being used for political or promotional goals.<sup>3</sup> As far back as the 1530s, natives in southern Texas told the explorer Cabeza de Vaca that the region to the north had no people nor any water, indicating some sort of harsh wasteland existed there. While it should be noted that these natives held de Vaca in high regard and possibly gave him a false report hoping he would remain with them, this is nonetheless the first reference known to scholars of any mention of a desert in the region referred to today as the Great Plains. Several years later Coronado found that his trip from northern Texas into Kansas took him across deserts predominantly devoid of

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931): 17-20. For additional information about the climate of America’s western interior, see Edward Aguado and James E. Burt, *Understanding Weather and Climate*, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999): 420, 422-23.

<sup>3</sup> See David M. Emmons, “The Influence of Ideology on Changing Environmental Images: The Case of Six Gazetteers” in *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement*, Brian W. Blouet and Merlin P. Lawson, eds. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975): 125-136.



wood and water. Much later, the late eighteenth century explorer James Mackay described a portion of northern Nebraska as a “Great Desert of drifting sand without trees, soil, rocks, water or animals of any kind, excepting some little vari-colored turtles of which there are vast numbers.”<sup>4</sup>

Lewis and Clark, while famous for their early nineteenth century exploration of the trans-Missouri West, “contributed only a miniscule amount, if any, to the Great American Desert notion,” according to Terry Alford. Because they stuck to the route of the Missouri River, “they avoided the Great Plains region except in the Dakotas and Montana, even there staying too close to the river bank to taste much of the sub-humid countryside.”<sup>5</sup> Of greater significance, then, for establishing the notion that the lands between the Missouri River and Rocky Mountains harbored barren, desolate expanses were the explorations of Zebulon Pike and Major Stephen Long.

Pike, in 1806-07, concluded that “these vast plains of the western hemisphere may become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa; . . .” Long, however, has earned much credit for the propagation of the desert theory in America’s western interior through his exploration account written by Edwin James. James wrote disparagingly of the territory from the middle region of present day Oklahoma to the Rockies in no uncertain terms:

We have little apprehension of giving too unfavorable an account of this portion of the country. Though the soil is, in some places, fertile, the want of timber, of navigable streams, and of water for the necessities of life, render it an unfit residence for any but a nomade population. The traveller who shall, at any time, have traversed its desolate sands will, we think, join us in the wish that this region may forever remain the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, the prairie

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<sup>4</sup> Information and quote in G. Malcolm Lewis, “Three Centuries of Desert Concepts in the Cis-Rocky Mountain West,” *Journal of the West* 4:3 (July 1965): 457, 459.

<sup>5</sup> Terry L. Alford, “The West as a Desert in American Thought Prior to Long’s 1819-1820 Expedition,” *Journal of the West* 8:4 (October 1969): 518-19.

wolf, and the marmot.<sup>6</sup>

Although by 1830 the “Great American Desert” designation became a common way to refer to the future territories of Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado,<sup>7</sup> it was not the exclusive view of this great expanse beyond the Missouri. Explorer John C. Fremont, for example, revealed two different images of the Great Plains region in his mid-century explorations. In 1842 he observed an area between the North and South forks of the Platte River and concluded that “the barren appearance of the country, is due almost entirely to the extreme dryness of the climate.” He also “reached a high bleak ridge” of which he “had never seen anything which impressed so strongly on my mind a feeling of desolation.” To Fremont, “the barren and arid country seemed as if it had been swept by fires, and in every direction the same dull ash-colored hue, derived from the formation, met the eye.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly Fremont recorded a negative view of an arid, desolate land.<sup>9</sup> But in 1843 Fremont revealed a different aspect of the Plains as observed between the

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<sup>6</sup> Elliot Coues, ed., *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, to Headwaters of the Mississippi River, Through Louisiana Territory, and in New Spain, During the Years 1805-6-7* (3 vols.; New York: Francis P. Harper, 1895), II, 525; For the location of the region James wrote of, see John L. Allen’s “The Garden-Desert Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 5:4 (Fall 1985): 211. For quote, see Edwin James in *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819 and '20, by Order of the Hon. J.C. Calhoun, Sec’y of War: Under the Command of Major Stephen H. Long*, (2 vols.; Philadelphia: H.C. Carey and I. Lea, 1823): II, 161.

<sup>7</sup> J. Christopher Schnell, “William Gilpin and the Destruction of the Desert Myth,” *The Colorado Magazine* 46:2 (1969): 132-33.

<sup>8</sup> John C. Fremont, *A Report on an Exploration of the Country Lying Between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, on the Line of the Kansas and Great Platte Rivers*, Senate Executive Document 243, 27<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3<sup>rd</sup> Sess., 1843, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that Fremont did point out in 1842 the fertility of the South Platte and Arkansas river valleys for maintaining military posts, and he indicated that east of Fort Laramie was a prairie region “covered with the verdure of rich grasses, and highly adapted for pasturage.” See Fremont’s *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, Printers, 1845): 49.

Arkansas and Platte rivers: “The soil of all this country is excellent, admirably adapted to agricultural purposes, and would support a large agricultural and pastoral population.”<sup>10</sup>

Fremont’s emphasis on the agricultural and pastoral benefits of the Great Plains signaled the re-interpretation of that region<sup>11</sup> that soon followed under the tireless promotional efforts of William Gilpin. Known in a variety of roles including army officer, newspaper editor, and politician, Gilpin championed the Plains as “the PASTORAL GARDEN of the world.” He chose aspects of it that many considered detrimental to settlement and transformed them into positive attributes. For example, rather than focusing on what the Great Plains lacked in more familiar and traditional resources, he instead extolled the merits of dried buffalo grass as hay; the use of roots, coal, and buffalo dung as fuel; and the suitability of adobe bricks from Plains soil for fencing.<sup>12</sup> Gilpin’s last series of tracts promoting the Great Plains made their way into many publications from 1857 to 1860, ensuring that a wide audience became introduced to these theories with the effect that Gilpin shaped much of the public’s ideas about that unique stretch of unsettled terrain in the American interior.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, eds., *The Expeditions of John Charles Fremont* Vol. 1 (3 vols.; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970): I, 442.

<sup>11</sup> Bradley Baltensperger contends that “a fact ignored by many later scholars is that Long was actually using a desert label for a pastoral concept. In view of both Long and Pike only crop production was not feasible on the ‘desert.’ They both envisioned an area in which livestock grazing would flourish. The label was more influential than the idea, however, and Long’s and Pike’s advocacy of grazing was ignored. The ‘sandy deserts’ and the ‘Great American Desert’ obscured the fitness of the trans-Missouri west for pastoral pursuits.” See Bradley Howard Baltensperger, “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk: Pre-Migration and Post-Settlement Images of the Central Great Plains” (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1974): 30, 32.

<sup>12</sup> G. Malcolm Lewis “William Gilpin and the Concept of the Great Plains Region,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 56:1 (March 1966): 37, 47. *New York Daily Times* (New York), 25 May 1857. See also Schnell’s “William Gilpin,” 134, and Lewis’s William Gilpin,” 47, for Gilpin’s portrayal of Great Plains resources.

<sup>13</sup> Schnell, “William Gilpin,” 137.

Evidence exists indicating that by mid-century, the desert image of the Great Plains no longer held a significant place in the collective mind of Americans.<sup>14</sup> Reports of the overland trekkers on their way to Salt Lake City, Oregon, or California from the 1840s onward helped to dispel the myth of an interior desert. Various other factors also contributed to the growth of the garden concept, including political concerns for furthering the yeoman ideal rather than Southern slavery, and for social concerns of securing a working class safety valve. Issues such as these played into the Great Plains' image transformation from that of a desert into one of a garden, for the existence of a formidable desert in the public mind prevented the achievement of such particularly Republican goals. The perceived image, then, of the western interior had to become that of an inviting garden in order to bring about "the Americanization of the plains."<sup>15</sup>

This positive image came to overshadow the desert view of the Great Plains by the latter decades of the nineteenth century. John L. Allen purports that by 1880, such image transmitters as newspapers, books, atlases, and geographies registered the Plains as a fertile place, desirable for agriculture.<sup>16</sup> Thus the Great Plains' image as a garden, particularly from the standpoint of promoters, came to dominate, while the desert image continued on its downward spiral.

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<sup>14</sup> Some scholars contend that an educated elite subscribed much longer to the desert theory than other segments of the population. People from rural areas, especially of the interior, tended to believe in the garden theme. Bowden claims that the prevailing image of the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was of a "Garden of the World." See Martyn J. Bowden, "The Great American Desert and the American Frontier, 1800-1882: Popular Images of the Plains" in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, Tamara K. Hareven, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971): 48-79; and Martyn J. Bowden, "The Perception of the Western Interior of the United States, 1800-1870: A Problem in Historical Geosophy," *Proceedings of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 1, 1969, 16-21. See also Allen, "Garden-Desert Continuum," 207-220, which includes the overland migrants view of the Plains in the mid-1800s, p.213-214.

<sup>15</sup> David M. Emmons, "Influence of Ideology," 128-29,132. See the rest of this article for a more complete look at political, ideological, and social issues influencing the desert/garden image transformation of the Plains and the impetus behind Plains settlement.

<sup>16</sup> John L. Allen, "The Garden-Desert Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century" *Great Plains Quarterly* 5:4 (Fall 1985): 213-15.

The transformation that resulted in the decline of the desert theory did not bring its complete demise, however. The desert theme still appeared in boomer literature. Two Great Plains scholars have opposing viewpoints as to why the desert image was used in this literature in the years after the Civil War. Did the desert theory serve as a deterrent to western settlement, or did the theory provide a creative opportunity to promote the area as a garden cultivated by hardy individuals? David Emmons, in *Garden in the Grasslands*, argues for the former. According to him, “. . . the desert theory still had an enormous influence. Witness if nothing else the lengths to which the western promoters went to refute it.” In refutation of Emmons, B.H. Baltensperger, in his article “Plains Boomers and the Creation of the Great American Desert Myth,” argues for the latter, contending that Great Plains promoters did not attempt to disprove any desert theories because no such pervasive beliefs existed. Instead, “boomers were engaged in conjuring up a negative, exaggerated, patently unacceptable and unaccepted image of the plains as desert - . . .” Baltensperger claims, “in order to assert the reality of a garden.” In his opinion, use of such images became a “promotional ploy.”<sup>17</sup>

Railroad literature from the latter decades of the 1800s, in conjunction with various other sources, demonstrates that while the desert image may not have been dominant from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, the image nonetheless still exerted enough force to warrant refutation by Plains promoters seeking to sell railroad and government land.<sup>18</sup> A variety of evidence indicates that the desert image of the Great

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<sup>17</sup> David Emmons. *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971): 5; Baltensperger, “Plains Boomers and the Creation of the Great American Desert Myth,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 18:1 (January 1992): 60.

<sup>18</sup> Railroads obviously wanted to sell their land, but they also had an interest in settlers homesteading free government land in adjacent lots. More people along the railroads’ paths meant more business conducted through the use of trains. See Oscar O. Winther, “The English in Nebraska, 1857-1880,” *Nebraska History* 48:3 (Autumn 1967): 213-214; Barry B. Combs, “The Union Pacific Railroad and the Early Settlement of

Plains still existed to some extent in the public mind, even if the desert theory had lost many adherents by the last several decades of the century.

It does not stretch the limits of credibility to suggest that people have a natural propensity to continue believing in some concept, idea, or myth, even if it has been discredited. Frank H. Spearman, writing in *Harper's New Monthly*, found just this situation in 1888. Commenting that thirty years earlier "*terra incognita*" signified the vast area between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains in school geography books, and that "The Great American Desert" designated a part of the United States, he lamented the continued belief in these images, by at least one segment of the population, after the negative labeling had been removed from maps. He found it almost incredible that anyone of intelligence could still hold to what he felt was a persistent, mistaken belief in a disproved theory:

This feature of our old United States maps has been dropped only within the last twenty years. Even where a better intelligence has latterly completely expunged it from the maps, it still remains obstinately fixed in the minds of thousands of otherwise intelligent people, who have not kept pace with the developments of the past quarter of a century.<sup>19</sup>

G.M. Lewis supports this contention when he relates that "regional concepts have tended to persist after experience has proved them to be baseless or after they have ceased to serve any useful purpose, . . ."<sup>20</sup> By Lewis' way of thinking, the persistence of

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Nebraska 1868-1880," *Nebraska History* 50:1 (Spring 1969): 6; Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier 1854-1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas & Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954): 186-87; and Anderson, "Influence of Railway," 41, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Frank H. Spearman, "The Great American Desert," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 77:458 (July 1888): 232.

<sup>20</sup> G.M. Lewis, "Regional Ideas and Reality in the Cis-Rocky Mountain West," *Institute of British Geographers, Transactions* no. 38 (June 1966): 146.

a desert image continuing into the late nineteenth century, whether or not most people subscribed to it after the Civil War, seems quite plausible.

But railroad promoters not only invoked the desert image in an attempt to refute it; they also used the image as a sort of marketing tool. This simultaneous usage of the desert image for two different reasons draws on both Emmons' and Baltensperger's theories, but differs from Baltensperger's which claims promoters used the image *exclusively* as a "promotional ploy." I argue instead that Great Plains railroad promoters attempted to discredit any belief in the desert, as Emmons contends, but that they also used the desert image as a means to market available lands, as Baltensperger believes, by praising the hardy, exceptional settlers who endured the rigors of a Plains desert. If a person possessed such quality traits, the promoters implied, by coming west they could set themselves apart from the average citizen and become an American worthy of respect and admiration.

The ensuing discussion provides illustrations in support of Emmons' position that enough of the desert image yet lingered in the late 1800s to warrant refutation of it by such central Plains boosters as railroad companies. The remainder of this paper then demonstrates the validity of Baltensperger's argument, thus leading to the conclusion that railroad companies used the desert image to deny that one existed on the central Plains and also to make a contradictory claim that a desert had been and could be overcome by hardy, resilient individuals brave enough to settle there.

Various twentieth century scholars provide support for the suggestion that desert images of the Great Plains still survived well into the late nineteenth century. Jean P. Retzinger, in her article "Framing the Tourist Gaze: Railway Journeys Across Nebraska,

1866-1906,” infers that as late as 1871 the picture of the Plains as a “Great American Desert” yet remained in public thought. According to Retzinger, this prompted W.R. Vaughan to attack such a misconception in his *Union Pacific R.R. Business Hand Book and Emigrant Guide* by insisting that “the old fear of lack of rain in ‘The Great American Desert’ has been utterly exploded.”<sup>21</sup>

Richard H. Dillon asserts in “Stephen Long’s Great American Desert” that L. Frank Baum lent credence to the desert theory in his famous story *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, first produced in 1900. Baum set Dorothy’s farm home in the scorched grasses and parched soil of a Kansas plains seared by an unforgiving sun, thus implanting in his readers’ minds a picture of a bleak and arid land.<sup>22</sup>

Ray Allen Billington, in *Land of Savagery Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, contends that European authors differed in their view of the Plains. Romantic writers praised the virtues of the prairies and Plains, but yet more realistic writers portrayed the Plains as a forbidding, difficult land, giving special attention to its extremes of weather. While tornadoes, blizzards, and thunderstorms became the focus of much vivid and exaggerated descriptions of Plains life, the desert image also figured prominently. Writers “pictured the summers as smelting-furnace hot, with a relentless sun beating from copper-hued skies, withering the grass and cracking the earth with its rays.” Even railroad tracks could not bear the

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<sup>21</sup> Jean P. Retzinger, “Framing the Tourist Gaze: Railway Journeys Across Nebraska, 1866-1906,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 18:3 (Summer 1998): 221.

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Dillon, “Stephen Long’s Great American Desert,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 111:2 (April 14, 1967): 94. For information about Baum’s publication date and book title, see *The Annotated Wizard of Oz: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank Baum with an introduction, notes, and bibliography by Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1973): 29-30.



oppressive heat. They sometimes sought relief by somehow moving themselves into the shade, enjoying the relief until they heard the sound of an approaching train.<sup>23</sup>

Certain periodicals also underscore a public desert belief. A British magazine, *Good Words*, began an article on western British territory in 1874 with “To a citizen of the United States, the Great West means the valley of the Mississippi and the desert beyond.”<sup>24</sup> *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* published an article by Horace Greeley in 1869 that contained a note of hope for the Plains, yet he also depicted it as a daunting desert-like country. Greeley envisioned “a region covered with houses and fences,” and even referred to the Plains as a “yet unmade garden of the world,” but also painted a bleak picture for much of the area. “Drouth is, throughout each summer, the master scourge of the Plains,” Greeley explained, and:

No rain--or next to none--falls on them from May till October. By day, hot suns bake them; by night, fierce winds sweep them; parching the earth to cavernous depths; withering the scanty vegetation, and causing fires to run wherever a thin vesture of dead herbage may have escaped the ravages of the previous autumn.<sup>25</sup>

Several years later, *Harper’s* printed a poem entitled “A Voice in the Desert” that spoke of a “vast plains” where the poet experienced a vision “On one side beauty, on the other dread--Between the Tempest and the scene Elysian--An antelope unfrighted bowed its head.” Before ending the poem several stanzas later, the poet described the antelope as “Beside a stunted shrub, alone, unfriended, It waited ’midst the awful desert place, . .

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<sup>23</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981): 90-93 (quote on p. 92).

<sup>24</sup> George M. Grant, “The Great West,” Part I, *Good Words for 1874*, vol. 15: 263.

<sup>25</sup> Horace Greeley, “The Plains, as I Crossed Them Ten Years Ago” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 38:228 (May 1869): 789, 791-92.

<sup>26</sup> Horatio N. Powers, “A Voice in the Desert,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 52:308 (January 1876): 208.

The desert image also turns up in some of the English travelogues from the late nineteenth century. F. Trench Townshend's account, published in 1869, tells of his trek through north-central Kansas. Finding the area "a country dreary and barren as an African desert," Townshend's detailed description explains his unflattering assessment:

Dry, short, brown grass and stunted cactus, never growing more than a couple of inches high, covered the plain, while the whitened bones of buffalo and deer alone showed that game had ever existed in the country. Not a living thing, either bird or beast, was to be seen. No water ran down the ravines, nor were there any trees on their precipitous sides, only tall dead sunflowers and wild roses long since withered.<sup>27</sup>

Ten years later S. Nugent Townshend's visit to the western half of Kansas and a portion of eastern Colorado left his account not much more favorable to the Great Plains landscape than the former Townshend a decade earlier. Finding the Kansas area desolate and boring, he felt it "a country almost utterly barren and devoid of interest, save what it borrowed from old Spanish and Mexican legends." Immediately upon crossing into eastern Colorado, he and his party met with disappointment and asked in exasperation "What about the Switzerland of America? This is a horrible desert,       " Reaching La Junta, Townshend found that "the next eleven miles to Rockyford is an absolute desert."<sup>28</sup>

Published around 1880, James Burnley's account of his American adventure included a trip across the central Plains. Burnley indicated that a desert image of the Plains yet remained when he wrote of how he and his companion wanted "to see for ourselves the much-vaunted loneliness of the American desert, and to let our souls wander in blank forgetfulness over untold miles of flat desolation." His impression of

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<sup>27</sup> F. Trench Townshend, *Ten Thousand Miles of Travel, Sport, and Adventure* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1869), microfilm, 112-113.

<sup>28</sup> S. Nugent Townshend, *Colorado: Its Agriculture, Stockfeeding, Scenery, and Shooting* (London: "The Field" Office, 1879), microfilm, 2-3.

crossing the Kansas Plains seemed to confirm for him the truth of such a desert, for he described the countryside in an unfavorable light. "Solemn desolation is imprinted upon the entire scene," he wrote. Burnley noted "a dead oppressiveness of colour to contend with on the prairie which can be seen nowhere else in the wide world." As if in desert terrain, "all looks burnt up, parched, and dry." Unlike at home in England, "there is not a relieving bit of green anywhere."<sup>29</sup>

Several important nineteenth century British writers furthered the desert image of America's western interior. In *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, Richard F. Burton, in 1862, left his readers with the clear impression that a portion of the Plains was indeed a desert:

The western portion of the valley, from Fort Kearny to the base of the Rocky Mountains -- a breadth of 300 to 400 miles -- is emphatically "the desert," sterile and uncultivable, a dreary expanse of wild sage . . . grass is found only in the rare river bottoms . . . and the few trees along the borders of streams -- fertile lines of wadis, which laborious irrigation and coal mining might convert into oases -- are the cottonwood, and willow, to which the mezquite may be added in the southern latitudes. The desert is mostly uninhabited, unendurable even to the wildest Indian.<sup>30</sup>

Robert Louis Stevenson, writing in *Across the Plains*, encountered a grim Nebraska land in 1879 as he traveled by train. This experience summoned up in him a sympathetic regard for earlier migrants who traveled slowly and wearily by wagon over this monotonous land lacking any truly redemptive qualities:

They had nothing, it would seem, to overtake; nothing by which to reckon their advance; no sight for repose or for encouragement; but stage after stage, only the dead green waste under foot, and the mocking, fugitive horizon.

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<sup>29</sup> James Burnley, *Two Sides of the Atlantic* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., [ca. 1880]): 127, 135-36.

<sup>30</sup> Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, 2d ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862): 8.

Stevenson also entitled a section of this same book as “The Desert of Wyoming,” and impressed upon his readers that “the plains have a grandeur of their own; but here there is nothing but a contorted smallness. Except for the air, which was light and stimulating, there was not one good circumstance in that God-forsaken land.”<sup>31</sup>

In an even more dreary description of America’s Plains, Arthur Conan Doyle, in *A Study in Scarlet* published in 1887, painted for his readers a harsh, forbidding scene of a land unfit for human habitation:

In the central portion of the great North American Continent there lies an arid and repulsive desert, which for many a long year served as a barrier against the advance of civilization. From the Sierra Nevada to Nebraska, and from the Yellow-stone River in the north to the Colorado upon the south, is a region of desolation and silence. . . . It comprises snow-capped and lofty mountains, and dark and gloomy valleys. . . . there are enormous plains, which in winter are white with snow, and in summer are grey with the saline alkali dust. They all preserve, however, the common characteristics of barrenness, inhospitality, and misery.

There are no inhabitants of this land of despair.

By describing the American Plains as a repulsive, oppressive desert, these writers tapped into “a very widespread myth in the literature of the period,” writes Owen Dudley Edwards, editor of Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet*. This myth, Edwards contends, “conflated actual deserts, from the Wahsatch Mountains in central Utah to the Sierra Nevada in California stretching down to Arizona and New Mexico, with the flat, dry, and treeless Great Plains east of the Rocky Mountains, . . . .” Edwards here indicates that the desert image of the western American interior had not faded away in the late nineteenth century, but instead continued to thrive in British literature.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *Across the Plains with Other Memories and Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895): 42, 46-47.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*. Owen Dudley Edwards, ed. (Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, reprint, 1994): 69, 183.

Other contemporary examples of the use of the desert image in the late 1800s come from western booster Charles Dana Wilber and explorer and geographer John Wesley Powell. Wilber, a man who assumed such auspicious titles as Inspector of Mining Lands in the Western States and Territories, and Superintendent of Geology and Mineralogy at the Nebraska Academy of Sciences in the late nineteenth century,<sup>33</sup> but who might be more accurately considered a speculator in land and an amateur scientist,<sup>34</sup> published *The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest* in 1881. In it Wilber alluded to the persistence of the desert belief, at least in some eastern circles, when he related the following story involving travelers from back East:

In the summer of 1869 or 1870, during the first construction of the Kansas Pacific Railway, I saw at a water station in Western Kansas, . . . a live stalk of corn, like a miniature palm, growing in that desert soil, its broad leaves rustling in the wind with as much assurance of vigorous growth as if in Illinois or Iowa. . . .

The eastern excursionists on the same train, who had, in terms that denoted more strength than politeness, disposed of the whole region as worthless—an eternal desert, etc., saw in this apparition an argument that kept them silent, especially on the subject of soil and corn raising; . . .<sup>35</sup>

Also in this same publication, Wilber further stressed that the desert image yet remained a real force when he claimed that in the late 1860s, the “wise men of the ‘Hub’” [reference to Boston capitalists] passed on the chance to obtain some of the most fertile and productive areas in America because they believed the supposed desert lands of Nebraska were worthless. They paid for such a mistake, however. “Wise as the seven of Solomon, their adherence to the traditional lies and theories of the American desert cost them a princely estate worth \$15,000,000.” Wilber, writing as late as 1881, stated quite

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<sup>33</sup> Walter M. Kollmorgen, “The Woodsman’s Assaults on the Domain of the Cattleman,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59:2 (June 1969): 225.

<sup>34</sup> Jean P. Retzinger, “Framing the Tourist Gaze,” 221.

<sup>35</sup> C.D. Wilber, *The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest* (Omaha: Daily Republican Print, 1881): 140.

pointedly that a misconstrued desert concept did still exist in many eastern and European minds:

The desert country, or American desert, reported as being and lying west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian, has no real existence.

It was reported formerly to be a desert from its comparatively dry appearance. The entire region west of the Missouri river was for years held under the same reproach. Even now thousands of people in the Eastern and Middle States have their desert ideas on the great western plains. A letter recently received from a gentleman in Zanesville, Ohio, inquires what is the cost of irrigation in Eastern Nebraska. His neighbors, of course, must be equally benighted. No missionary effort can relieve such ignorance. Most of the “desert” ideas are traditional. . . . When the hejira to California began ten thousand teamsters crossed and recrossed these plains. They saw no attempt at farming except in the river (Mo.) counties, and their verdict was swift, viz: That the entire region was worthless, except to fence out the California earthquakes. . . . Even excursion and hunting parties, whether from Britain or Boston, had the same stereotyped curse for the country, viz: A dry, sterile, alkali region, forever incapable of use for farming purposes.

Later, while discussing water and land even beyond the Plains, Wilber makes a reference to the Mormons’ transformation of a desert into a garden, concluding that this example brings promise for all the West:

Here is the desert of Deseret, now a blooming and fruitful garden, but recently a barren waste. All these prosperous farms and homes came up out of the soil first planted and watered by Brigham Young and his followers . . . . Prompted by this modern miracle, this complete transition from a barren and hopeless desert to a land of plenty, wrought out of human industry, have we not the surest guaranty in the future for the occupation and use of all our domain upon a scale hardly conceivable at present?<sup>36</sup>

John Wesley Powell, geographer and explorer of the American West, advanced the desert image in the 1890s by designating the Great Plains area west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian as an “arid region.” This aridity necessitated an artificial means of watering crops, and Powell’s emphasis on the need for irrigation in this vast area likely furthered the conception of it as a desert. In a report for the Committee on Irrigation of the House of Representatives, Powell “exhibited an outline of the area in which irrigation is necessary.

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<sup>36</sup> Wilber, *Great Valleys*, 145-47, 151.

The eastern border of the region . . . runs across the country near the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian, but is irregular.” He pointed out the precarious nature of this region for agriculture if cultivated without irrigation. Powell further reported that aridity was also a concern east of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian, for that area often required irrigation. By pointing out such a problem of undependable rainfall east of this designated line of aridity, Powell thus enlarged the area of what could be considered near desert-like lands west of the Missouri River. He reported that:

There is a doubtful belt of 2 or 3 degrees in width on the east side of the line, which I have heretofore in my writings called the subhumid region, where irrigation is practiced to some extent. In some years there is sufficient rainfall to warrant the planting of crops and agriculture is successful, but from time to time seasons come in which there is no rainfall, and crops are cut off and disaster comes to the people; so they are beginning now to resort to irrigation 100 or 200 miles beyond or east of this line.<sup>37</sup>

Promotional railroad literature of the late 1860s onward contains evidence in support of Emmons’ argument, for a portion of these brochures, books, and pamphlets point to a perceived need on the part of railroad companies to dispel whatever yet remained of a belief in barren, infertile lands lying west of the Missouri River. Dismissing the threat of an arid and sterile wasteland and instead lauding the region as a highly productive garden, railroads portrayed the former “desert” as a great agricultural and grazing land, capable of producing outstanding crops and providing excellent range for cattle. Fearing too few buyers for land in the central Plains region, various railroad companies felt compelled to show that a potential garden existed there instead of an unproductive wasteland.

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<sup>37</sup> J.W. Powell, “Eleventh Annual Report of the United States Geological Survey to the Secretary of the Interior 1889-’90, Part II – Irrigation” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891): see maps and p. 203.

Efforts to portray these erstwhile unproductive lands as fertile prompted the Union and Kansas Pacific Railways, through the writing of J.W. Norton in 1869, to promote the agricultural potential of Kansas through an exaggerated but humorous tale. The story involved a man on horseback riding by a Kansas cornfield that boasted stalks exceptionally high for that time of year. He noticed that the corn grew without needing any sort of cultivation. The man inquired of an old fat farmer propped idly on a fence:

“Friend, don’t you ever work your corn out here?” And thus came the reply:--  
“’Twouldn’t do, stranger, ’cause if you tickle the roots the least mite with a hoe, the plaguey thing grows so high you can’t reach the ears. Some of the new uns tried it last year, and they had an awful sight of trouble cutting stalks down first, and then gathering. Couldn’t save half their crop, and what they did save they couldn’t shell, ’cause the ears wouldn’t go through the machine, and—”

The man suddenly rode off in confusion if not disbelief. “But then he remembered he was in Kansas,” wrote Norton, “the only rival of which, California, grows mammoth trees, and he could easily see how farmers who grow such big crops would be tempted to tell big stories.”<sup>38</sup>

Another example comes from the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, which in 1876 noted that western Kansas, with its rainfall, could yet prove more productive than believed by those in the eastern part of the state. The company bemoaned the misuse of the desert image for the Kansas Plains. “The ‘Great American Desert’ theory is getting very thin,” the company complained. “The boundaries of this geographical bugaboo have so rapidly receded before the plow, . . . .” Two years later, under the authorship of R.L. Thomas, the company again indicated that Kansas very recently had been considered part

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<sup>38</sup> J.W. Norton (Union and Kansas Pacific Railways), *Emigration to Kansas, the Glory of the West* (n.p.: Kansas Land & Emigration Company, [1869]): 12. Although this piece of literature was written for a land and emigration company and not specifically for a railroad company per se, I am including it in my study of railroad literature as this piece promotes railroad land and likely was connected with the railroad company. According to David Emmons, “One of the most commonly used promotional techniques was the formation of land companies which were technically independent of the railroads but actually, . . . identical in management and financing.” See Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands*, 31.



of the traditional western interior desert lands, but it could now claim a rebirth: “The counties named here are those which lie in that portion of Kansas known as the Arkansas Valley, and which we might call the New Kansas, because eight years ago it was scarcely known, except as a part of the Great American Desert.”<sup>39</sup>

The Union Pacific Railway Company, through a statement made in an 1882 brochure put together by J.T. Allan advertising UP lands in Nebraska and surrounding territories, patted itself on the back for a job well done in transforming land many had considered useless into productive, valuable acreages: “The comparative statements prove the influence of the railroad in building up a region once supposed to be desert lands, and cannot be denied.”<sup>40</sup>

In a publication from 1880, the Union Pacific Railroad attempted to lure settlers into Kansas with a pledge that it would not be offering sterile, useless land for sale. This suggests that a significant number of people still harbored fears of a great desert waste in the central Plains. “We do not seek to astonish you,” the Union Pacific assured its readers, “with scenes of *prairie dog villages, buffalo carcasses, desert landscapes and barren sand hills* [italics in original], as the inviting features of the section in which you are asked to establish a home . . .” the railroad company claimed. Instead, the Union Pacific offered acreages even more desirable than some of the older land in the East.<sup>41</sup>

In the late 1870s, the Union Pacific alluded to Kansas’ desert stigma of the recent past when it cited the publisher of “The Homestead Guide,” Hon. F.G. Adams, who

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<sup>39</sup> Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, *How and Where to Get a Living* (Boston: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, 1876): 7; R.L. Thomas (Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad), *How and Where to Earn a Living*, 3d ed. (Boston: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, 1878): 10.

<sup>40</sup> J.T. Allan (Union Pacific Railway), *Nebraska and the Territories as Developed by Railroad Building and Operation* (Omaha: Land Department of Union Pacific Railway Company, 1882): 2.

<sup>41</sup> Union Pacific Railroad, *Farms and Homes in Kansas* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., Printers, 1880): no page numbers included in brochure.

related that part of Kansas “‘was virtually a *terra incognita* until the year 1870.’” He went on to say, “‘Up to that time the country had borne a bad name as to its capacity to support a population . . . It was reputed to be a tree-less plain, of sterile soil, and ungenial climate—in fact, a desert, for all practical and economical purposes.’” The company continued with his description of Kansas, with Adams contending that “‘until within a very recent period, this . . . district of country, has been considered to be a part of the ‘treeless plains,’ and, with the region farther to the westward, has been embraced within the mythical country denominated the ‘Great American Desert.’”<sup>42</sup>

In the early 1870s the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad recalled that “Ashland [Nebraska] was long ago a lodging place of way-faring men adventuring into the so-called great American Desert, . . . .” as if to imply that a desert did not exist then or now. The Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad claimed twenty years later that a vast number of acres between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains “were converted into well-tilled farms” and “powerful commercial cities were securely established.” But, the C., B. & Q. maintained, “these tremendous material accomplishments were not all, nor perhaps the best, development of this great period of Western history.” In the view of this railroad company “it was demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that the ‘Great American Desert’ of the early geographers and explorers was a mere myth, born of ignorance and misunderstanding.” The C., B. & Q. here indicates that the desert image was indeed a force to be reckoned with, presenting an obstacle to the sale of central Plains lands.

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<sup>42</sup> Union Pacific Railroad, *The Emigrant Guide or Hand-Book of the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad, & c.* (n.p.: Advertising Company, 1878-79): 5, 7-8.

The company further hinted at the influence of the desert theory when it compared the biblical Nazareth, a place of no special significance before becoming associated with Christ, to Nebraska, northwestern Kansas, and eastern Colorado, for these regions had also earned a special, unexpected distinction: “Astonishing as most of these figures [crop statistics] will be found, they are absolutely true, and doubters are cordially invited to come and see, as Philip said to the man who had misgivings about any good coming out of Nazareth.” It further attempted to refute any public belief in a Plains desert when it contended that a Nebraska county on the Colorado line deserved “especial mention” for its crop productivity “because it was but lately the very heart of the ‘Great American Desert.’”<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the best example of a desert belief remaining long after the mid-1800s comes from “a most valuable little pamphlet, entitled ‘Nebraska, its Achievements and Capabilities,’” from which the Missouri Pacific Railway, in 1892, quoted John Hyde, “Chief Special Agent of the Eleventh United States Census for the statistics of cereal production, forestry and special crops.” Hyde asserted that “‘*The Statistical Gazetteer of the United States*, published in 1853, stated that the central portion of Nebraska Territory was an unprofitable, irreclaimable wilderness, . . . in short, the Great American Desert.’” Such a notion likely came from Fremont’s report, Hyde theorized, “‘but be that as it may, it has been utterly falsified,’” he insisted. Hyde went on to imply that several false notions about the old and new West still existed in the minds of those who lived back

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<sup>43</sup> Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, *Views and Descriptions of Burlington & Missouri River Railroad Lands, with Important Information Concerning Where and How to Select and Purchase Farms in Iowa and Nebraska, on Ten Years’ Credit* (Burlington, Iowa and Lincoln, Nebr.: Land Department of the Burlington & Mo. River Railroad Co., [ca. 1872]), see “No. 16;” Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, *Great Opportunities for Farmers, Business Men and Investors in Nebraska, Northwestern Kansas and Eastern Colorado* (Chicago: Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, 1892): 1,8,9.

East or in Europe, not least of which was the erroneous belief that a desert existed in the central Plains:

“The intelligent foreigner who expects to shoot buffalo in Chicago, and is half prepared to have the train by which he travels attacked by Indians as it speeds through Northern Indiana or Illinois, excites our amusement and pity, not altogether unmixed with contempt; but his ignorance is, to say the least, quite as excusable as is that of the native American, who, in this enlightened age, still looks upon the ‘Great American Desert’ as anything more than an exploded geographical figment, or who regards any considerable portion of Nebraska, or even Eastern Colorado, as the worthless and unattractive region it was formerly supposed to be.”<sup>44</sup>

As the foregoing evidence suggests, use of the desert theme by railroad promoters stemmed from a need to disprove such a negative image, for it threatened land sales. At the same time, however, promoters employed the desert image as part of a marketing plan that shrewdly praised the foresight and perseverance of those pioneers who had conquered the “desert.” This promotional scheme aimed to challenge potential settlers to join the ranks of this special group of stalwart conquerors by taking up land in the Great Plains and proving they had the fortitude and ability to succeed in such a difficult climate.

M.J. Bowden, in “The Invention of American Tradition” bolsters Baltensperger’s theory. He claims that after 1880, Plains pioneers began to reminisce about taming a desert that in reality they had not encountered. The impetus for this memory change came from such individuals as county historians and newspaper editors seeking stories of

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<sup>44</sup> Missouri Pacific Railway, *Statistics and Information Concerning the State of Nebraska, Taken from State and National Reports, Showing the Advantages, and Giving Information for the Farmer, the Mechanic, the Laborer, the Merchant, the Manufacturer, . . .*, (St. Louis: Woodward & Tiernan Printing Co., [1892]): 7-8. It should be noted, especially as the Missouri Pacific makes reference to a “wilderness,” that *desert* and *wilderness* have a history of being used synonymously in American thought. For a background of its early colonial origins, see M. J. Bowden, “The Invention of American Tradition,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 18:1 (January 1992): 5-7. Also, consult the first footnote in Terry L. Alford, “The West as a Desert,” 523. For the biblical context of desert and wilderness, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967): 13-17. For further reference, see Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985): 68-69.

the early days. Bowden purports that historians from 1885-1910 “drew on pioneer reminiscences without knowing of the self-glorification embedded within those recollections” and thus unwittingly helped to disseminate a lasting American tradition.<sup>45</sup>

Another example of false magnification of a group’s history comes from the Mormons. In “The Mormon Experience: The Plains as Sinai, the Great Salt Lake as the Dead Sea, and the Great Basin as Desert-Cum-Promised Land,” R.H. Jackson documents the transformation in Mormon history that began soon after their settlement of the Great Basin. On their overland trek, Mormon pioneers recorded favorable reactions to the Great Plains and the Great Salt Lake Valley. In their minds, they had not encountered a forbidding wasteland. But, in order that their identity as a group “be reinforced by a tradition of shared hardship and by a glorification of the past,” Mormon settlers began to view their long trek and initial settlement in Utah as an extraordinarily harsh ordeal. Now, in direct contradiction of the first pioneers’ reports, the Great Plains and the Salt Lake Valley both became bitterly miserable and forlorn deserts. Such a view served to underscore the miracle effected by the Mormons under God’s will and guidance in completing the treacherous crossing and taming the Great Basin.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> M.J. Bowden, “The Invention of American Tradition,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 18:1 (January 1992): 14. See also Bowden’s “The Great American Desert in the American Mind: The Historiography of a Geographical Notion” in *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Historical Geosophy in Honor of John Kirtland Wright*, David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 119-147.

<sup>46</sup> R.H. Jackson, “The Mormon Experience: The Plains as Sinai, the Great Salt Lake as the Dead Sea, and the Great Basin as Desert-Cum-Promised Land,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 18:1 (January 1992): 41-58 (quote on p. 41).

So turning now to nineteenth century promotional railroad literature, does any evidence exist that bears witness to some sort of marketing ploy on the part of promoters? Several examples suggest an affirmative answer.<sup>47</sup>

One excellent illustration suggesting a marketing strategy that sought to arouse feelings of pride and exceptionalism in prospective settlers comes from the creative advertising of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. This company enumerated under the heading “OUR DOCTRINE” eight reasons why someone should or should not come west. It consistently recommended individual forbearance and self-discipline, and eschewed the softer life of the East. A partial list reveals its unsubtle appeal to personal fortitude:

2. If hard work doesn't agree with a man, or if he can't get along, at least for a few years, without the luxuries and conveniences of New England, *he had better not go West.*
3. If one is liable to homesickness as soon as he gets out of sight of his “native rocks and hills,” or if he is easily discouraged, *the West is no place for him. . . .*
5. If one has not PLUCK and PERSEVERANCE enough to win success where everything but himself is favorable to him, he will surely fail “out West.” . . .
7. If a man has “failed to get on” in the East, he had better take a true “account of stock” of himself before he begins anew. If the main cause of the failure is *in himself*, moving out West will only make the fact more apparent, . . .<sup>48</sup>

In an earlier publication this company also attempted to appeal to manly pride by contrasting the hardy settler with the chronic whiner who never prospers anywhere:

Furthermore, in every new country will be found a sprinkling of loud-voiced individuals who never succeeded anywhere, or at anything, and who, through ignorance of practical farming, or organic weariness, would inevitably starve on the best farm in America. To this class, seeking a pretext for returning to their wife's relations, a partial drouth is a boon, and grasshoppers a munificent Godsend. They start, and “back home” is speedily supplied with yarns thick as hawsers about “the State what won't grow nuthin'.” . . .  
. . . . Kansas, at least, is not a balmy paradise for dreamy loafers.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> For additional examples and analysis, see Baltensperger's “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk,” 78-79, 131-37, 170-71, 201. See also Emmons, *Garden*, 33-34.

<sup>48</sup> R.L. Thomas, *How and Where to Earn a Living*, 3-4. Italics in original.

The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad promised emigrants that “luxuries will have for them a zest undreamed of by him who has not had his appetite sharpened for delicacies by earning them with toil and self-denial.” Hard work also figured into the brochure prepared by the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad in 1883, but it also emphasized other virtues needed to endure the desert-like conditions of northern Nebraska:

To the timid and the captious, and to all grumblers, its very vastness, its treeless and unshaded brightness, and its storm-swept baldness, are too awful and forbidding. But to the courageous, to the reasonable, and to all the patient toilers *who come to stay*, it gives recompense and peace.

Obviously, the Sioux City and Pacific signaled that no quitters need come west. The company also excoriated those with no self-discipline and character and praised those naturally successful souls when it claimed that “these thriftless ones would be poor anywhere on earth; prosperous ones would grow in any desert; for each has a genius for his way and a way to his destiny.”<sup>50</sup>

One final example comes from the Missouri Pacific Railway in its 1892 booklet, once again quoting John Hyde. Hyde espoused the notion that only people with exceptional foresight and the courage to challenge conventional wisdom would dare tackle the untamed Plains:

“It is a remarkable fact that the high-water mark for the time being of the tide of immigration has always been regarded as the extreme limit of practicable settlement, . . . Happily, however, there have never been wanting dauntless spirits, ready to push on and face the unknown, and these have, one after another, pricked the bubbles of imagination and falsified the statements and predictions of imperfect knowledge and hasty judgment.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, *How and Where to Get a Living*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Burlington and Missouri, *Views and Descriptions*, see “No. 9;” Sioux City and Pacific Railroad, *Northern Nebraska Considered Geographically, Topographically, Geologically, and Experimentally*. (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review & Herald Steam Printing House, 1883): 3.

<sup>51</sup> Missouri Pacific Railway, *Statistics . . . the Farmer, the Mechanic, . . .*, 7.

Thus, the Missouri Pacific, using the words of Hyde, attempted to sell land by appealing to potential settlers' pride. Echoing the marketing scheme of other railroad companies, the Missouri Pacific indicated to potential settlers that only those individuals possessing exceptional characteristics should come west.

Clearly, the idea of the Great Plains as a desert, whether accurate or not, played a powerful role in the promotional efforts of late nineteenth century western railroad companies. Evidence that the desert image had greatly diminished as a force by the second half of the century is irrelevant in light of evidence that points to the influence such an image still exerted. Railroad advertising in the form of pamphlets, books, and brochures used the desert image in order to assail it as myth. At the same time, however, they also employed it as part of a marketing strategy that attempted to appeal to those who saw themselves as hardy and courageous individuals. People who identified themselves in such a way or who wanted to prove themselves as a cut above the rest would, the railroads hoped, accept the challenge and come west. Use of the desert theory also became a means to glorify pioneers' achievements and affirm their wisdom and fortitude.

Disclaiming the existence of a desert while at the same time purporting that a desert had actually been overcome strains the limits of reason, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility in the human mind. Consider Baltensperger's finding that even today Great Plains residents embrace contradictory ideas of their region by believing the desert was a myth generated by some misinformed party but yet that a desert had actually been subdued by persevering and hardworking settlers. Such oppositional beliefs serve to



praise the assiduousness and wisdom of Great Plains pioneers and their descendants.<sup>52</sup> Despite defying logic, denying a desert to promote a garden while at the same time praising pioneers for conquering that desert underscores the durability and adaptability that the desert image possessed in late nineteenth century America.

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<sup>52</sup> Baltensperger, "Plains Boomers," 71.

## *Chapter Two:*

### **Rivals of the Southwest: Kansas and Nebraska as Health Destinations**

Not only did railroads incorporate the desert image into their promotional literature as a means to both refute the existence of a desert and, paradoxically, to celebrate those hardy settlers who tamed it in order to attract settlers to the central Great Plains, but they also claimed for the Plains a healthful, rejuvenating climate. Touting the healthfulness of dry air and plenty of sun, the railroads inadvertently emphasized the existence of a desert environment. Motivated by many settlers' beliefs that low-lying, swampy land served as lairs for disease, and feeling keen competition from the Southwest's attraction for tuberculosis victims and other invalids, railroad companies felt compelled to make exaggerated claims about the salubrious effect of land and climate in the central Plains. In this chapter I will discuss the background on nineteenth century beliefs about disease and environment, focusing on health migrations to the Southwest. I will then demonstrate that such beliefs and migrations caused railroad companies to advertise the central Plains as a country conducive to good health.

The railroads had good reason to stress, however dubiously, the beneficial health effects of Kansas and Nebraska living. Many nineteenth century settlers saw a connection between certain topographical and climatic conditions, such as relatively dry, well-drained land and areas free from decaying matter, with less frequent occurrences of

sickness. Billy Jones, in *Health-Seekers in the Southwest 1817-1900*, finds that early nineteenth century thought held that “fogs and vapors which hovered about stagnant waters, swamps, and muddy river bottoms” caused diseases, as did emanations from decaying matter. Nineteenth century writer Max Greene claimed ague in the Far West “is troublesome mainly upon low river bottoms, and where pools of sluggish water emit poisonous gases.” In promoting Kansas and southern Nebraska in the mid 1850s, Edward Hale, noting the healthy climate of these territories, expressed hope that these regions would be spared further disease found in more densely wooded areas, as “the forests are not so dense as those of some regions, the clearing away of the woods may not be followed by those forms of disease which sometimes accompanies the decay of great masses of vegetable matter.”<sup>1</sup>

The Mississippi Valley gained notoriety as a long corridor of sickness, taxing the life of its first white settlers. One writer outlined the causes of illness in the valley and indicated their severe consequences:

“The entire colonization of the Mississippi valley, from Pittsburg to Middle Kansas, a width of 1,000 miles, has been carried on with the almost universal accompaniment of fevers, due to the breaking up of the new soil, clearing of the forests, exposure to rain, and frequently to the necessity of drinking inferior water. . . . The terrible ‘fever and ague,’ oftener than otherwise, struck down whole families on their arrival in the new homes. Reflect on what a terrible burden this wholesale and depressing sickness (the seeds of which often remain permanently in the system) has been upon the first labors of the Western pioneer.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Billy M. Jones, *Health-Seekers in the Southwest, 1817-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967): 5-6; Max Greene, *The Kansas Region: Forest, Prairie, Desert, Mountain, Vale, and River* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1856), microfilm, 18; Edward E. Hale, *Kansas and Nebraska: The History, Geographical and Physical Characteristics, and Political Position of Those Territories; an Account of the Emigrant Aid Companies, and Directions to Emigrants* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, New York: J.C. Derby, 1854), microfilm, 239-40.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in William G. Ritch, *Illustrated New Mexico, Historical and Industrial*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Santa Fe: The Bureau of Immigration, 1885): 67-68. Ague represented a malarial condition and bilious fevers, referred to later in this paper and possibly referred to in this quote, were of a dysentery type of sickness. See Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 13.

Charles Dickens referred to the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as “a breeding-place of fever, ague, and death.” He found no redeeming qualities in the Mississippi itself, including nothing healthy. He declared “the hateful Mississippi . . . a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulchre, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise: a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it: such is this dismal Cairo.”<sup>3</sup>

Disease was not limited to the Mississippi River, however. Maladies and infirmities struck along other important rivers, such as the Wabash, Ohio, Missouri, and Arkansas. Nonetheless, the extensive Mississippi Valley earned the ignominious distinction as the greatest disease transmitter in nineteenth century America.<sup>4</sup>

As with rivers, prairies also received the stigma of causing diseases. Encompassing some portion, however large or small, of Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi, these prairie areas often occupied low-lying, saturated, nearly tree-less land. Too frequently lacking proper slope to encourage drainage, these grounds typically harbored troublesome insects. In addition, “their waters were discharged, especially during the hot summer months, through evaporation, a process which accentuated the swampish vapors and effluvia so feared by settlers.”<sup>5</sup>

Members of the medical profession also believed in the theory that diseases spread through effluvium. In the early part of the century, an Army surgeon general insisted that impure air and miasma from swamp areas produced disease. In the late 1860s, a

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens. *American Notes*, (Reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968): 197-98.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 8, 11.

physician who authored an extensively used medical text contended that more localized diseases were ““caused by poisonous miasmas [which] emanate from the soil,”” and that widespread infections circulated throughout the atmosphere. The late 1800s also saw confirmation of these basic ideas through Dr. W. C. Van Bibber, who maintained that ““the greatest number, as well as the most serious diseases, produced by the quality of the air alone, are found to originate in the lower strata of the air -- that is, at an elevation but little above the level of the sea.””<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the theories concerning causes of sickness, one bold treatment garnered widespread acceptance in the nineteenth century: a sojourn in western America. Such a practice had an early beginning, for with the opening of trade along the Santa Fe route in the 1820s, hopeful invalids made their way to the Southwest with the prospects of securing renewed health.<sup>7</sup>

Early explorers and travelers contributed to this belief in the West’s curative benefits. Edwin James’ account of Stephen Long’s expedition included observations on the “Omawhaw” Indians, noting that “no case of phthisis or jaundice fell under our observation.” In addition, “fevers, and fever and ague, are exceedingly rare.” Years later Fremont discovered that the “climate [west of Ft. Laramie] has been found very favorable to the restoration of health, particularly in cases of consumption [tuberculosis].”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 9. See also Carl Sauer’s “Conditions of Pioneer Life in the Upper Illinois Valley” in John Leighly, ed., *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963): 19-20.

<sup>6</sup> Quotes and information in Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Johanna E. Price, “Tuberculosis in West Texas, 1870-1940” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Galveston, 1982): 22.

<sup>8</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels 1748-1846* (32 vols.; New York: Ams Press, Inc., 1966), XV, 42-44; John C. Fremont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, Printers, 1845): 49. For various names for tuberculosis and its physical manifestations, see this chapter, 45.

Josiah Gregg's *Commerce of the Prairies*, written in the 1840s, attested to the rejuvenative powers of New Mexico, a region far beyond the death-dealing lands and waters of the Mississippi Valley. A tuberculosis sufferer who heeded the typical advice to head west, Gregg soon found himself able to ride a pony rather than lie in a wagon, and eventually made eight trips across the western prairies and plains in less than a decade.

He spoke glowingly of the healthful benefits of New Mexico:

Salubrity of climate is decidedly the most interesting feature in the character of New Mexico. Nowhere--not even under the much boasted Sicilian skies can a purer or a more wholesome atmosphere be found. Bilious diseases--the great scourge of the valley of the Mississippi--are here almost unknown. Apart from a fatal epidemic fever of a typhoid character, . . . New Mexico has experienced very little disease of a febrile character; so that as great a degree of longevity is attained there, perhaps, as in any other portion of the habitable world. Persons withered almost to mummies, are to be encountered occasionally, whose extraordinary age is only to be inferred from their recollection of certain notable events which have taken place in times far remote.<sup>9</sup>

Some physicians advocated a trek west for tuberculosis patients as a means to undergo rigors considered conducive to restoration of health. Medical practitioners such as Daniel Drake and Samuel Morton believed in the benefits of physical exertion and pure air, both inherent in western travel of the time.<sup>10</sup>

Extensive travel came for those lured to California or Oregon by the promises of renewed vigor in the Pacific West. John Unruh, in his classic *The Plains Across*, notes that hope for better health motivated some settlers to brave the rigors of the trails to Oregon and California. Several Pacific coast pioneers attested to this through their

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<sup>9</sup>John E. Baur, "The Health Seeker in the Westward Movement, 1830-1900," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 46:1 (June 1959): 93; Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies: or the Journal of a Santa Fe Trader, During Eight Expeditions Across the Great Western Prairies, and a Residence of Nearly Nine Years in Northern Mexico*, Archibald Hanna and William H. Goetzmann, eds., 1962 reprint ed. (2 vols., Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1844): I, 75-76.

written legacies, such as John Bidwell, part of the first group of emigrants that reached California in the early 1840s. All believed this country “to be extremely healthy,” Bidwell remarked, as well as relatively disease-free. He noted that all of those in the company who came to California for health found it, including “a young man by name of Walton, who, when he set out was of a death like appearance--having been afflicted with dropsy or consumption, landed in perfect health.” Bidwell knew of only one death, “and it was the opinion generally the cause of his death was intemperance and the want of exercise.” Upon asking a physician to name the most common disease found in California, “he answered ‘the knife’ having reference to the treacherous Spaniards.”<sup>11</sup>

Charles Stevens sang the praises of Oregon’s life-renewing clime when he wrote in 1858: “I tell you, it makes people young by coming here, and I have heard it said that people live to such an age, that moss will grow all over them.” He went on to claim that he knew of only one man having died “a natural death,” and, similar to Bidwell’s findings more than fifteen years earlier in California, his demise came about due to “his intemperate habits.”<sup>12</sup>

Of these two states, California earned the greater reputation for having a health-inducing climate. Notables such as Joseph Pulitzer and Robert Louis Stevenson ventured there in search of better health. Southern California especially merited a reputation for having a sanatory climate. Preferred by the majority of those in search of better health by the late 1870s, the lure of southern California’s salubrious climate contributed to the

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<sup>10</sup> Price, “Tuberculosis,” 47-48.

<sup>11</sup> John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979): 91-92; John Bidwell, *A Journey to California with Observations about the Country, Climate and the Route to this Country* (San Francisco: John Henry Nash, Printer, 1937): iv, 41, 44, 46-47.

phenomenal population growth of that state in the last three decades of the century.

Invalids seeking restored health substantially influenced the growth of southern California through their agricultural development of the area, such as in citrus growing, bee keeping, and poultry raising.<sup>13</sup>

California held no monopoly on preferred climates for invalids, however. Texas, more specifically West Texas, earned a reputation before the close of the 1870s as a region beneficial to invalids. Writing during this time of his experiences in Texas, Frank H. Taylor indicated that some Easterners had come to that state for health reasons. Extolling the benefits of ranch life for those in poor health, Taylor rhetorically asked how any medicine could compare with “a free canter across these glorious plains upon a June morning? All the senses are alert; all the brain, brawn, and vitality of a man are brought into play.” He continued his warm praise of Texas life and climate:

Under a life such as this the wan invalid will soon learn to lie down with his fellows beneath the stars, a saddle for his pillow, with no fear of colds. I never sat in a south or west bound train in Texas that I did not note some consumptive who journeyed toward the dry plains with hope and good prospect of regaining his lost heritage of health. The ranches are full of brown and bearded men, in full possession of glorious strength, who came hither under such conditions.<sup>14</sup>

Other parts of the Southwest also developed into convalescent havens. Arizona and New Mexico, though considerably later than Texas, California, and Colorado, became areas sought for their rejuvenescent benefits. Suffering from desperadoes, Indians, and lack of rail connections, these territories, eager to receive any sort of immigrant, healthy

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<sup>12</sup> E. Ruth Rockwood, ed., “Letters of Charles Stevens,” Part V, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 38:2 (June 1937): 188.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 101-02; John E. Baur, “The Health Seekers and Early Southern California Agriculture,” *Pacific Historical Review* 20:4 (November 1951): 347-363.



or not, initially lagged behind other renowned health areas in attracting outsiders. Hiram C. Hodge, praising the restorative Arizona climate for the world's infirm, believed it would be celebrated internationally when it finally "opened up, and [became] traversed by railroads," for then "Yuma and the other points named will of necessity become the centres of sanitariums of world-wide celebrity."<sup>15</sup>

Both Arizona and New Mexico did overcome their difficulties in opening up to settlement and each evolved into health meccas. Arizona, contends John Baur, became known as the best place for tuberculosis victims' recovery. Sufferers of a variety of other maladies, such as asthma and arthritis, also sought relief in the dry air of Arizona. Possibly as many as fifty percent of new migrants to Arizona came there for health reasons.<sup>16</sup>

New Mexico no less enjoyed a reputation for good health. George Pine, reminiscent of Josiah Gregg earlier, noted the longevity of New Mexico's inhabitants, for "the old people of Mexican towns look older than in any other country." He went on to speak of "a local proverb that this region is so healthy that the oldest inhabitants never die; but lean, attenuated and wrinkled, like Egyptian mummies, dry up ultimately and are blown away." Tuberculosis sufferers also found relief in New Mexico and became a significant part of that state's economy from the 1880s up to roughly 1940. Testifying to the influence of tubercular invalids in New Mexico, American author Katharine Fullerton

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<sup>14</sup> Price, "Tuberculosis," 24; Frank H. Taylor, "Through Texas," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 59:353 (October 1879): 714.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 112-13; Hiram C. Hodge, *Arizona As It Is; or, the Coming Country* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1877): 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> Baur, "Health Seeker in Westward Movement," 106-107.

Gerould, writing in 1925, claimed that “tuberculosis has ‘made’ both Albuquerque and Santa Fe, . . . .”<sup>17</sup>

While neither ranked as a major health destination, Utah and Nevada did find a few immigrants seeking out their climates for health benefits. F.V. Hayden claimed that tuberculosis and bronchial sufferers could experience some relief in Utah, and Mark Twain attested to Nevada’s curative effects in *Roughing It*. After a night’s camping on Lake Tahoe, Twain claimed that “three months of camp life on Lake Tahoe would restore an Egyptian mummy to his pristine vigor, . . . .” Glorifying the air and dry climate of that mountain area, Twain wrote:

I know a man who went there to die. But he made a failure of it. He was a skeleton when he came, and could barely stand. . . . Three months later he was sleeping out of doors regularly, eating all he could hold, three times a day, and chasing game over mountains three thousand feet high for recreation. And he was a skeleton no longer, but weighed part of a ton. . . . His disease was consumption. I confidently commend his experience to other skeletons.<sup>18</sup>

Colorado garnered distinction as a major destination for health-seekers in the nineteenth century and earned a reputation as a “‘sanitarium’” even while still a territory. Englishman James Burnley encountered this sentiment while on an excursion into the state, which he recorded in a conversation between his friend and an American cattleman: “‘Colorado, sir, is destined to be the Sanatorium of the world,’ said a tall Anglo-American cattle-breeder . . . ‘Here the consumptive cease from coughing and the

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<sup>17</sup> George W. Pine, *Beyond the West; Containing an Account of Two Years’ Travel in that Other Half of Our Great Continent Far Beyond the Old West, on the Plains, in the Rocky Mountains, and Picturesque Parks of Colorado* (Utica, New York: T.J. Griffiths, 1870), microfilm, 128; Jake W. Spidle, Jr., “‘An Army of Tubercular Invalids’: New Mexico and the Birth of a Tuberculosis Industry,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 61:3 (July 1986): 188-89; Katharine Fullerton Gerould, *The Aristocratic West* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925): 116.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 121; Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1872; reprint, with a foreword by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 170-71.

rheumatic are at rest.” Believing that the Colorado air comprised the sum of all the best medicines, the rancher claimed ““a man couldn't be sick if he wanted to in Colorado.””<sup>19</sup>

Commenting on the primitive forms of shelter some invalids employed, Isabella Bird explained what drew them to Colorado: “The climate of Colorado is considered the finest in North America, and consumptives, asthmatics, dyspeptics, and sufferers from nervous diseases, are here in hundreds and thousands, either trying the ‘camp cure’ for three or four months, or settling here permanently.” Charles Kingsley also believed in the healthy air and climate of Colorado, and noted the current trend whereby consumptives and asthmatics “are ordered now to Colorado from the Eastern States, and even from Canada, as English people are sent to Cannes or Madeira.” George Pine found the atmosphere there “so dry and exhilarating that life dances at every pore.” In some parts of Colorado, he heard, “it was so healthy that a man had to be killed to start a burying-ground.”<sup>20</sup>

Denver attracted a great number of health-seekers. According to one report, such persons constituted over one-fifth of the city’s population by the late 1890s. But according to Baur, Colorado Springs eclipsed Denver as a health resort, attaining international fame by the 1880s. Founded in the early 1870s, Colorado Springs developed quickly, receiving mostly upper-class settlers of which many were invalids.

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<sup>19</sup> Julius L. Wilson, “Pikes Peak or Bust,” *Rocky Mountain Medical Journal* 64:9 (September 1967): 59. James Burnley, *Two Sides of the Atlantic* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., [ca. 1880]): 141.

<sup>20</sup> Isabella L. Bird, *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 2d ed. (London: John Murray, 1879): 47; Charles Kingsley, *South by West or Winter in the Rocky Mountains and Spring in Mexico* (London: W. Isbister & Co., 1874): 143; Pine, *Beyond*, 116-117.

Also of importance, nearby Manitou's medicinal springs drew thousands of ailing people every year, adding to the popularity of the area.<sup>21</sup>

While a variety of illnesses and infections abounded in nineteenth century America, such as smallpox, rheumatism, cholera, and yellow fever, tuberculosis played a dominant role. According to Jones, "it was the disease of the vast majority of health-seekers." An affliction since ancient and even prehistoric times, tuberculosis continued to flourish so that by the early 1800s, it reigned as "the greatest single cause of disease and death in the Western world." Known also as "phthisis," "consumption," "scrofula," and "the great white plague," tuberculosis had risen to the top spot in the United States as the primary cause of death by the end of the nineteenth century. Its deadly reign owed much to such developments as increased urbanization, industrialization, and unhealthy conditions in living quarters and work places found in many cities. Characterized by such symptoms as weight loss, tiredness, and coughing that could induce spitting up of sputum and blood, tuberculosis spurred many of its victims westward.<sup>22</sup>

Varied but ineffectual treatments rendered the contraction of tuberculosis a death warrant for its hapless victims. From this disheartening situation arose theories at mid century of climate and "altitude therapy." Altitude supposedly cured a number of illnesses due to purer air and lower air pressure. Research done by a European physician espousing high altitude benefits for those suffering from lung diseases cited less humid

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<sup>21</sup> Wilson, "Pikes Peak," 59; Baur, "Health Seeker in Westward Movement," 104; Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 97-98.

<sup>22</sup> Baur, "Health Seeker in Westward Movement," 93; Jones, *Health-Seekers*, 144; Selman A. Waksman, *The Conquest of Tuberculosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964): 1; Rene and Jean Dubos, *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952): 10; Waksman, *Conquest*, 2; Price, "Tuberculosis," 157, 4.

air and pollution, fewer cloudy days, soil dryness, and lower temperatures as among the healthy advantages found at higher elevations.<sup>23</sup>

Such a theory lent credence to the idea that the American West's mountains held rejuvenative benefits for the infirm. Some physicians held that at about five thousand feet "a line of immunity from tuberculosis existed," above which no germs lived and in which light and heat could freely work curative effects. Others stressed the importance of dry air found at higher elevations as of prime importance in the cure of disease, while some cited the beneficial lack of extreme temperatures.<sup>24</sup>

Increasing interest in climate as an antidote for disease and sickness and the proliferation of health resorts promoted misinformation about climatotherapy, prompting the formation of the American Climatological Association in 1884. Organized with the intent to study the correlation between diseases of the respiratory system and climate, the association came to concern itself primarily with pulmonary tuberculosis and climatotherapy.<sup>25</sup>

Climatologists often held differing opinions about the benefits of various aspects of climate, but pollutant-free, pleasant winds found general acceptance. Also, the curative role of sunshine garnered unanimous consent. Theories on altitude level varied, however, and, dependent on a variety of factors, accepted altitudes for rejuvenation ran from as low as 1000 feet to as high as 10,000 feet.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Spidle, "An Army," 182, 184-85; See also Frank B. Rogers, "The Rise and Decline of the Altitude Therapy of Tuberculosis," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 43:1 (January-February 1969): 4. Rogers distinguishes between "climatotherapy of tuberculosis" and "altitude therapy," (p. 1), but for the purposes of this paper, altitude therapy is included under climatotherapy. See also Price, "Tuberculosis," 52-60, for distinctions of medical climatology and altitude therapy.

<sup>24</sup> Spidle, "An Army," 185-86.

<sup>25</sup> Price, "Tuberculosis," 52-54.

<sup>26</sup> Price, "Tuberculosis," 57, 316-17.

Much from central Plains railroad literature of the latter 1800s reflects contemporary thought and beliefs about causes and preventions of disease. Likely feeling competition with the celebrated salubriousness of the Southwest, the central Plains' railroads felt a need to bolster the attractiveness of land in the central Great Plains by advertising the healthful benefits of Kansas and Nebraska.<sup>27</sup>

Railroad companies received some support for such claims through mid-century publications of Max Greene's and Edward Hale's views. Hale wrote that "the climate of Kansas and southern Nebraska has always been singularly healthy." Cholera, Hale maintained, still affected some areas there, but the region saved some emigrants from disease, for "in 1849, when the cholera was very fatal in the adjoining towns of Missouri, companies of emigrants, in some instances, escaped from it, by going into the prairie and encamping there." Greene added to Hales' statements by alleging that "Kansas has, during the current century, been a favorite resort for the knowing class of consumptives." He spoke exuberantly of the Kansas air and its effects, using such adjectives and phrases as "buoyancy and vigor," "elation," "wholesome air," and "elasticity of youthfulness," professing that "there is a vitality in the atmosphere that is truly wonderful."<sup>28</sup>

Echoing Greene several decades later, near the end of the century, John James Ingalls also sang the glories of the Kansas atmosphere. He found that "the ozone of the air, its dryness, and the elevation of the land produce nervous exaltation, which creates enthusiasm, movement, energy, push, vigor, and 'go'; . . . ."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For mention of health in railroad advertising, see Helen Marie Anderson, "The Influence of Railway Advertising upon the Settlement of Nebraska" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1926): 30.

<sup>28</sup> Hale, *Kansas and Nebraska*, 239; Greene, *The Kansas Region*, 18-19.

<sup>29</sup> John James Ingalls, "Kansas--1541-1891," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 86:515 (April 1893): 711.

Support and publicity as exhibited by Hale, Greene, and Ingalls for the healthful benefits of the central Plains environment could only serve to bolster any claims the railroads made about the salubrious climate of that part of the West. Railroad promotional literature is replete with references to the healthy atmosphere and climate of the central Plains. Their exaggerated claims speak for the keen sense of competition they likely felt with other western regions noted for healthy climates. Central Plains railroad companies had lands to sell and government lands to promote to lure settlers, and such acreages had to exceed the attractiveness of all other alluring western lands available.<sup>30</sup>

The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad felt compelled to embellish descriptions of its landholdings no less than any other company. It found several conditions present in Nebraska, northwestern Kansas, and eastern Colorado land to declare the region “a sanitarium for those afflicted by chronic ailments that are common in the East.” The C., B. & Q. further insisted that “many thousands of persons who have come here hopeless invalids have found at least a new lease of life, while multitudes have been restored to almost or quite their wonted vigor.” The company also boasted that this area had the world’s lowest death rate, despite that it attracted “thousands annually of invalids who are incurable and seek its benefits when too late.”<sup>31</sup>

In similar fashion, the Union Pacific insisted that its Kansas lands exceeded any others in the West for enjoying a nearly disease-free environment. “Bilious complaints, fever and ague, and other disorders resulting from miasmatic influences, are much less

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<sup>30</sup> In addition to the following discussion of promoters’ claims for the climate of the central Plains as healthy, see also Bradley Howard Baltensperger, “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk: Pre-Migration and Post-Settlement Images of the Central Great Plains” (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1974): 98-99, 150.

frequent than in other portions of the west.” Those who fell ill were to be blamed for their own “carelessness and improper exposure,” but recovery came easily with healing herbs found in groves of trees and fields.<sup>32</sup>

Going beyond claiming merely a healthful climate for their landholdings, sometimes railroad companies advertised that one could feel younger on the central Plains. The Sioux City and Pacific Railway reported the story of a man from Indiana who settled with his family in eastern Nebraska. He claimed that for over the course of two years members of his family suffered illness while in Indiana. After their move to Nebraska they found consequent relief, and no one “ever mentioned the idea of going back to the old sickly 80.” His rheumatic father-in-law, unable to work for fifteen years back East, needed only one year in the new climate to feel “ten years younger than when he left Indiana.”<sup>33</sup>

Rhapsodizing almost poetically, the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad made enthusiastic claims for health and renewed youth in the climate of its Nebraska landholdings in the North Platte area:

The bright skies, pure water, and clear, life-inspiring atmosphere of the North Platte Country give to men and animals the divinity and inspirations of youth. Everybody feels young, elastic and self-commanding in this healthful country, and nothing denotes age save the hills and stately cottonwoods. Men and animals move with quick, elastic step, and live in the atmosphere of health and content. . . . Old men and women grow young with a renewal of vital force, in an atmosphere where respiration has the ease and freedom of healthful sleep.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, *Great Opportunities for Farmers, Business Men and Investors in Nebraska, Northwestern Kansas and Eastern Colorado* (Chicago: Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, 1892): 4.

<sup>32</sup> Union Pacific Railroad, *Kansas Lands* (New York: Trow & Smith Book Manufacturing Company, n. d.), no page number.

<sup>33</sup> Sioux City and Pacific Railroad, *Northern Nebraska Considered Geographically, Topographically, Geologically, and Experimentally* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review & Herald Steam Printing House, 1883): 15.

<sup>34</sup> Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, *The Great North Platte Region of B. & M. Railroad Lands* (n.p.: A. Gast and Co., [ca.1878]): 14.



Not outdone by the Burlington and Missouri, the Sioux City and Pacific attempted to sell its lands in northern Nebraska by claiming restorative powers of youth, rejuvenation of mental functions, and freedom for social and intellectual growth not found in older, more settled areas:

The invalid from the older lands will find in these bright skies and clear waters and rare radiant atmosphere of these elevations, the life-renewing and health-inapiring [sic] forces that are scarcely less than a benediction to brain and body. He will find too, in this broader theatre of mental and material action a sense of amplitude and freedom, of mental and social enlargement and liberty unknown to the more stunted and circumscribed ways of the older lands. Old men recover a sense of divine youth in this far-reaching new land where every element gives new and quick impulse to brain and body, where nothing denotes age but the rocks and hills and every phase of life has new and grander meaning to the observant visitor.<sup>35</sup>

An editor of the *Dayton Journal* in Ohio, reported the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, found the Kansas climate comparable to that of California's. Commending the state's rejuvenative effects on his constitution, the editor divulged that he had "learned all about this grand climate when I was a youngster in California, . . . for the climate of the mountains and valleys of the golden State is substantially the same. It was renewal of youth to me. DeSoto, seeking the fountain of eternal youth, did not go far enough."<sup>36</sup>

The Missouri Pacific Railway assured readers of its 1892 pamphlet advertising Nebraska that this state "is one of the healthiest States in the Union." It quoted a Superintendent of Census as commenting that "there is no more healthy region than Nebraska between the Alleghenies and the Rocky mountains.'" Nebraska fared much

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<sup>35</sup> Sioux City and Pacific Railway, *The Elkhorn Valley on the S.C. & P.Ry in Nebraska* (n.p.: Sioux City and Pacific Railway [1884]): 44.

better in number of consumptives per 10,000 residents compared to several other states, the company maintained, even beating California by a wide margin.<sup>37</sup>

In the late 1870s, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* published an article, "Climates for Invalids" that prescribed freedom "from excessive wind, cloudiness, and dust" as three important requirements for a sanatory location. Possibly such assertions influenced railroad land promotions, as evidenced by the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad in its portrayal of much of the central Plains as having "persistent, wholesome and health-giving" gentle winds. These "breezes are not so violent as to cause annoyance or inconvenience." While this comment seems especially fallacious, considering the reputation for fierce winds and tornadoes the central Plains traditionally has, the C, B. & Q. seemed to exaggerate even further when it made the dubious claim that "the cyclone is an impossibility on account of the formation of the surface, which renders impossible the conditions of atmosphere which give birth to destructive winds." It obviously felt a need to emphasize health-inducing breezes and downplay the destructive winds that commonly descend on the Plains.<sup>38</sup>

The Union Pacific called attention to the beneficial gentle breezes as well as the absence of excessive heat in Kansas. It publicized Palmer, Kansas as a town with a clear atmosphere where "in summer the breeze blows almost continually," complementing the

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<sup>36</sup> Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, *Kansas in 1875. Strong and Impartial Testimony to the Wonderful Productiveness of the Cottonwood and Arkansas Valleys* (Topeka, Kans.: Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Company, 1875): 23.

<sup>37</sup> Missouri Pacific Railway, *Statistics and Information Concerning the State of Nebraska, Taken from State and National Reports, Showing the Advantages, and Giving Information for the Farmer, the Mechanic, the Laborer, the Merchant, the Manufacturer, . . .* (St. Louis: Woodward & Tiernan Printing Co., [1892]): 11-12.

<sup>38</sup> T.M. Coan, "Climates for Invalids," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 58:346 (March 1879): 586. It is worth noting that the author denies the suitability of the western interior climate for invalids, and instead

comfortable nights devoid of any hint of oppressive heat “so dangerous to health as well as disagreeable.” Playing on these themes again, the Union Pacific advanced Kansas as a place where “the heat of summer is tempered by continual breezes from the south; the nights are invariably cool.”<sup>39</sup>

In addition to breezes, sunshine also affected a healthy climate. In the late 1870s, the Burlington and Missouri advertised the North Platte region in Nebraska as a place where “the sun shines 320 days of the year, and the skies are as bright and genial as those above the Golded Horn.” Almost as if providing an explanation for so many bright days, the company claimed that “the climate of this region has undergone a radical change.” Long periods of cloudy days could not prevail in this changed climate characterized now by “no long seasons of continuous RAINFALL.” Instead, short storms with ample rainfall replaced a long rainy season. Incredibly, this climate change occurred due to “the advance of settlement, cultivation, crop-growing, tree-planting, railway, telegraph and town-building, and other causes of atmospheric disturbances attendant upon civilization.” Years later the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy also emphasized a great amount of sunshine even though it claimed fewer days of sun for its holdings in Nebraska, eastern Colorado, and northwestern Kansas, for this area soaked up “300 days of bright sunshine each year.”<sup>40</sup>

The Sioux City and Pacific Railroad made a bolder claim by stating that “Nebraska as a State has a national fame for its great number of ‘clear’ days--being days in which *no*

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recommends recuperating abroad (see p. 586-89). Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, *Great Opportunities*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Union Pacific Railroad, *The Emigrant Guide or Hand-Book of the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad, & c.* (n.p.: Advertising Company, 1878-79): 23; Union Pacific Railroad, *Farms and Homes in Kansas* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., Printers, 1880): no page number.

*clouds are visible*--and in no portion of this sun-blessed State is there a section more favored with clear, bright days” than northern Nebraska.<sup>41</sup>

Not only did wind, temperature, and amount of sun make a difference, but quality of air and climate counted significantly for a healthy environment. The Burlington and Missouri of Nebraska, as if rivaling its more famous neighbor, Colorado, touted the salubrity of southeastern Nebraska’s air and climate: “THE CLIMATE Is exhilarating [sic], temperate and healthful, and the atmosphere dry and pure” which prevented “fever and ague, so common in new countries.” Further commending the state’s invigorating climate, the company declared “in fine, that atmosphere of Nebraska is very pure, clear, dry, elastic and bracing, and promotes in a high degree mental and physical activity and development.” Many years later, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy attested to the rejuvenative benefits of air over its lands in Nebraska, eastern Colorado, and the northwestern portion of Kansas: “Elevated and smooth, the pure air of mountain and plain sweeps over it in constant and gentle currents, ever freshening, purifying and cleansing.” The Union Pacific indicated that “the dryness and *purity of the air*” [italics in original] affected health as well as did “the absence of swamps and stagnant water” in Kansas.<sup>42</sup>

Such lack of marshes, sloughs, and swamps figured in highly to the prospect of an environment’s wholesomeness. Land needed good drainage in order to avoid stagnant waters that were thought to harbor disease-producing noxious gases and vapors. The

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<sup>40</sup> Burlington and Missouri, *Great North Platte*, 4 - 5; Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, *Great Opportunities*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Sioux City and Pacific, *Northern Nebraska*, 43.

Sioux City and Pacific Railway, stressing the absence of sluggish water, advertised the Elkhorn Valley in northern Nebraska as having “SUPERB NATURAL DRAINAGE . . . consequent upon the deep-set rapid streams, frequent ‘draws’ and ravines and the open and porous structure of the subsoils, is a wonderful conservator of health . . .”<sup>43</sup>

Excellent drainage also factored into why the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad found the upper Arkansas Valley so conducive to good health. The valley’s “gentle and uniform rise,” combined with the “temperate latitude, the well drained surface of the land, no stagnant water or overflowed lands, tells the story of its healthful climate.” The company also extolled the rolling land of Kansas, for it produced fine drainage and good highways. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe drew attention to the region’s health advantages acquired because Kansas had “no swamps and very rarely a slough, -- that terror of most flat prairie countries.”<sup>44</sup>

Closely associated with drainage in preventing disease, nineteenth century thought considered elevation an important component of a healthy environment. Railroad literature frequently makes reference to the altitude or elevation of lands for sale. Irrigation concerns possibly played at least a minor part in the companies’ mention of this, or to assure prospective farmers that land drained sufficiently, thereby preventing fields from becoming marshy. Most likely, however, it stemmed from a belief that adequate elevation affected drainage and meant less susceptibility to disease. The Sioux City and Pacific asserted that northern Nebraska, for example, “is high enough to be

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<sup>42</sup> Burlington and Missouri, *The Old B. & M. Railroad Ahead. Keep in the Right Latitude* (Philadelphia: H.A. Chambers, 1878): 17; Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, *Great Opportunities*, 3; Union Pacific, *Farms and Homes*, no page number.

<sup>43</sup> Sioux City and Pacific Railway, *Elkhorn Valley*, 1.

above malaria or ague, which diseases or plagues are the dread of the lower altitudes in a new country.” For those settlers interested in Kansas, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe offered the Arkansas Valley as a home “delightfully tempered and made salubrious and healthy by the rising altitude.” The Burlington and Missouri provided a short elevation table to stress the gradual elevation from the Missouri River to west-central Nebraska. The company hoped to convince its readers that such “uniformity of the ascent” meant that “perfect drainage is insured, and malarial influences are impossible.”<sup>45</sup>

While elevation well above sea level was important for good health in nineteenth century thought, the railroads’ concern for elevation may also reflect competition with the popularity of high mountain air in nearby Colorado. Railroad companies of the central Plains often indicated certain elevations, all necessarily much lower than the celebrated Rocky Mountains, as especially desirable for health. R.L. Thomas, for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, commented on the “REMARKABLE HEALTHFULNESS” of the Arkansas Valley, averring that “this is attributable largely to its altitude, near 1,500 feet above the level of the sea at Newton, . . .” reaching 4,764 feet beyond Kansas in Pueblo. The North Platte region of Nebraska boasted a “tone and crispness of a rare, clear atmosphere,” influenced by “its mean elevation of 2,000 feet above the tides,” claimed the Burlington and Missouri. In a later publication, this company advertised a slightly higher elevation as producing “The Pure Air of the Prairies” in the South Platte country of

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<sup>44</sup> Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, *Ho! For the New Kansas!* (Topeka, Kans.: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, 1877): no page numbers.

<sup>45</sup> The Missouri Pacific Railway included an altitude table in their pamphlet describing Nebraska land because it perceived an “interest being taken by the public in irrigation, drainage, etc., that depend upon the general slope of the country or ‘lay of the land’” See the Missouri Pacific Railway’s *Statistics and Information Concerning the State of Nebraska*, 61. For attempts to allay fears about poorly drained, swampy farm land, see Burlington and Missouri, *Great North Platte*, 14. Sioux City and Pacific, *Northern*

southeastern Nebraska. It claimed “the mean elevation of Nebraska is 2,500 feet above sea level. Therefore the air is pure, and conduces to health.”<sup>46</sup>

Such an elevation found favor with the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad. To attract buyers for its land in northern Nebraska, the company insisted that the area in question “is about 2,500 feet above the sea level, which takes it above malarial diseases.” A year later, the Sioux City and Pacific acclaimed Brown County, Nebraska for its “clear, crisp, life-giving atmosphere” at 2,400 feet. A bracing climate for all the living, the company stated that in Brown County “men, animals and plants luxurate [sic] in the life-renewing elements of a brilliant climate.”<sup>47</sup>

Invalids should seek an elevated, dry climate with an invigorating atmosphere, the railroads claimed, but everyone, sick or well, would find comfort in a temperate climate.<sup>48</sup> This “golden mean” could be found in the central Great Plains, if one believed various railroad companies’ promotional literature. What more logical location, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe implied, than that centrally located state, Kansas. In demonstration of the important center position that Kansas enjoyed, the company asked its readers to fold a map of America in half using its east and west ends, then fold again from north to south, and notice how the fold lines met in the middle of Kansas, the very center of the

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*Nebraska*, 38; Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, *How and Where to Get a Living* (Boston: Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, 1876): 26; Burlington and Missouri, *Old B. & M. Ahead*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> R.L. Thomas (Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad), *How and Where to Earn a Living* (Boston: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, 1878): 7; Burlington and Missouri Railroad, *The Great North Platte Region*, 4; Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, *The South Platte Country, and the Advantages It Offers to Home-Seekers in the New West* (Lincoln, Nebr.: The Immigration Bureau of the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad Co., 1883): 4.

<sup>47</sup> Sioux City and Pacific Railroad, *Northern Nebraska*, 43; Sioux City and Pacific Railway, *Elkhorn Valley*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson notes this in “Influence of Railway,” 30. Baltensperger, however, in his study of booster literature, goes into more detail about climate than Anderson. See his “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk,” 84-87.

United States. By following the east-west fold, one could see how it tracks the 38th parallel, touching just north of Richmond, Virginia, adhering to the latitude of that state as well as central Kentucky. On the other side of the continent, the fold arrived at a point near San Francisco. With such a mild latitude, the company felt it proved “that in the ‘Upper Arkansas Valley,’ in South-western Kansas,” in which their landholdings lay, “lies the ‘golden mean’ of the continent of North America, the temperate line equally distant from the Atlantic ocean on the east and the Pacific ocean on the west . . . .” Such a temperate area avoided harsh and lengthy winters of northerly climes and excessive, energy-draining heat of southern areas.

The 38th parallel north represented “the favorite latitude of America,” asserted the company, indicating that the parallel’s climate “is just far enough north and just far enough south for comfort.” In an earlier publication, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe also lauded the 38th parallel as America’s preferred latitude, “free from the long, cold winters of the North, and the hot, unhealthy influences of the South.” In its lands here settlers could find a mild climate, “being in the latitude of Southern Kentucky and Virginia.” In the opinion of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, southwestern Kansas fulfilled the longings of a populace seeking to avoid extremes of weather.<sup>49</sup>

Southwestern Kansas and the 38th parallel did not have the most temperate climate, in the opinion of the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad, but the lands lying between the 39<sup>th</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> latitudes, which included northern Nebraska’s 41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup>, deserved this

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<sup>49</sup> Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, *Ho! For the New Kansas!*, no page numbers. Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, *See Kansas By Daylight Through Passenger Trains from Kansas City and Atchison to the Rocky Mountains* (St. Louis: Woodward, Tiernan and Hale, Printers, [ca. 1876]): no page numbers. Also, see Baltensperger’s “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk,” 72, for mention of importance for boosters of eastern latitudinal climates corresponding with that of the central Plains.



distinction. The company insisted that “the climate between the latitudes of 39 and 43 degrees is better than any other; not excessively cold in winter or hot in summer.” This favored area of Nebraska is “free from the extremely long and cold winters of Dakota and Minnesota, as it is also free from the scorching heat and droughts of Kansas and Texas.”<sup>50</sup>

David Emmons, in *Garden in the Grasslands*, found the Santa Fe selling the 39th parallel as the ideal for climate. In this temperate latitude “the rays of the sun struck at precisely the right angles and with an almost supernatural effect. Bodily vigor and mental alertness were inevitable consequences of residence in this most favored land.”<sup>51</sup>

Presenting the importance of latitude in a slightly different vein, the Burlington and Missouri advertised the “Middle North Platte Country” of Nebraska as lying between the northerly latitude of Chicago and the southerly latitude of New York City, finding these available lands “in the very centre, from north to south, of the great grain, fruit and grazing or dairy belt of the United States.” The inclusion of fruit likely served to indicate just how temperate a climate could be found in that part of Nebraska. The company made an explicit claim for the region’s clement weather by stating that the climate there “is the equable mean between the high cold North and the low humid South.”<sup>52</sup>

For a pleasant, mild climate in the vast central Great Plains, the Union Pacific vaunted northern Kansas as the best place for prospective settlers. This area could be compared with the climate of Virginia and the Carolinas due to its comfortable 52 degrees mean annual temperature. Its equable climate stems from its location away “from the soft and enervating heats of the extreme South, and the expensive and inclement

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<sup>50</sup> Sioux City and Pacific, *Northern Nebraska*, 43, 38.

<sup>51</sup> David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971): 37.

rigors of New England.” Furthermore, “the winters are short, dry and invigorating,” while “the heat of summer is tempered by constant breezes from the south, and frequent showers. The nights are invariably cool.” The Union Pacific boldly pronounced each autumn season every year as a “Perpetual Indian Summer.”<sup>53</sup>

These examples of the railroads’ attempts to convince would-be settlers of the mildness of the central Great Plains climate corresponds with Bradley Baltensperger’s findings in his dissertation “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk: Pre-Migration and Post-Settlement Images of the Central Great Plains.” Baltensperger researched promotional material put out by various agencies, including railroad companies, and found that “the belief in similar climates in lands of the same latitude was gaining in strength and could be employed in later years by promoters anxious to draw immigrants from Pennsylvania, Illinois, Missouri, and other rich farming states to the east of Kansas and Nebraska.” The bottom line for Plains’ boosters meant depicting the central Plains as having a temperate, comfortable climate.<sup>54</sup>

Latitude needed to be far enough north to escape not only the uncomfortable sultry heat of the South, but also to prevent its indolent-inducing effects. A school of thought existed in the latter half of the nineteenth century that saw Southerners as a lazy people due to their particular climate. John William Draper, in “Influence of Climate Upon National Character,” believed that a climate could be too temperate, having detrimental effects upon the industriousness of a people. He theorized that since a northern climate forces its populace to accomplish its work while the summer season allows outdoor

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<sup>52</sup> Burlington and Missouri, *Great North Platte*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Union Pacific, *Kansas Lands*, no page number.

<sup>54</sup> Baltensperger, “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk,” 72, 84-87. See also p. 150.

pursuits, the Northerner is forced into steady, regulated work habits. In the South, the climate allows year-round out-of-doors work affording the opportunity for Southerners to procrastinate. "For this reason the Northern man must be industrious; the Southern may be indolent, having less foresight and a less tendency to regulated habits."<sup>55</sup>

Railroad companies tended to concur with Draper's belief that a Southern climate produced laziness, but for a different reason. Heat and humidity of the southern environment had an "enervating" effect upon persons residing there. The Union Pacific dwelt at some length on the detrimental effects of such a climate in its attempt to sell Kansas lands. To contrast its lands with the excessive humidity of regions farther south, the Union Pacific invited its readers to compare Kansas with Texas and all the South. Since these states' elevation hardly rose above the ocean, moisture satiated the air. When combined with warm temperatures, this situation created a heavy, muggy climate having a dispiriting effect upon a person's physical disposition:

The physical energies are enervated and weakened, and the bodily activities reduced and enfeebled. . . Under the subtle influence of the balmy climate of the South, men do, in spite of themselves, incline to inaction and repose; they would rather imitate the Spaniard and Italian enjoying the *dolce far niente* (sweet laziness) in the fragrant shade of a grove, than the busy activity prevailing in the Northern and Western States.

Any Northerner attempting to live in the South with the intention of retaining his native work ethic will find himself, in as little as one or two years' time, divested of his industriousness as he capitulates "to the same indulgence in sensuous ease and physical inactivity which characterizes the people among whom he has chosen his new home." In contrast, those choosing to settle in Kansas find that "on its breezy, high prairies bodily

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<sup>55</sup> John William Draper, "Influence of Climate Upon National Character," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 31:183 (August 1865): 392.

power is invigorated” and that not only is idleness impossible, but one finds a feeling of enjoyment in working, even in the worst heat of July and August.

Perhaps feeling competition from Texas’ more noted salubrious climate in the latter 1800s, the Union Pacific attempted to portray the South as victimized by disease due to its lower elevation. The Southern farmer, insisted the railroad company, “is emaciated by ague and ague medicines, thin, sallow, loose-jointed” while farmers “on the elevated prairies of Kansas,” are “the very picture of robust health.” Due to their energizing climate, Kansans have superior farms compared with those farther south, while the unfortunate Southerner lives a lackadaisical life in wretched dwellings. But the Southerner ought not suffer criticism, for “he is an unconscious, and, perhaps, unwilling victim of the influence of the climate.”<sup>56</sup>

Yet central Plains railroads faced competition from more than just the climate of better-known southwestern health destinations. Scenic considerations also played a role in determining popular locations. Realizing this, the Sioux City and Pacific Railway made boastful, exaggerated claims that a certain northern Nebraska canyon would likely become a resort for both health and pleasure seekers. As many resorts had developed in the West in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Sioux City and Pacific obviously hoped Nebraska could compete with such developments. Given that “the resort hotels of the elite, more often than not, belonged to the railroads,” according to Earl

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<sup>56</sup> Union Pacific Railway, *Kansas. The Golden Belt Lands Along the Line of the Kansas Division of the U. P. R’Y* (n.p.: Union Pacific Railway, [ca.1883]): 6-7. For mention of the enervating climate of the southern areas, see the Sioux City and Pacific Railway, *Elkhorn Valley*, 1, and Union Pacific, *Kansas Lands*, no page number.

Pomeroy, “and the resort towns were the hotels,” the Sioux City and Pacific most likely sought to cash in on the trend of the times.<sup>57</sup>

One can assume Colorado’s health and pleasure resorts, especially Colorado Springs, prompted the company to advertise this potential resort in northern Nebraska’s Elkhorn Valley, in the “bright young railway town” of Long Pine. As if comparing the canyon at Long Pine with those of Colorado, the company employed language evocative of an almost mystical land:

It was founded . . . on the railway and the banks of Long Pine river, in the midst of beautiful tree-crowned bluffs, wild, weird, beauty-haunted gorges, glens and canons, clothed in the everlasting verdure of cedar and pine and enlivened with scores of matchless fountains as sweet as Siloam and with volume equal to the needs of a great city.

The promotional pamphlet continued in the same vein, referring to Long Pine as the “CITY OF THE SEVEN SPRINGS.” Possibly vying with the popularity of narrow-gauge train rides in the scenic Colorado Rockies, the Sioux City and Pacific noted its “railway bridge that hangs an hundred feet above the wild, dashing little river flowing down its rocky bed through the wildest and most picturesque gorge this side of the Rockies.” The company concluded that “nowhere in the west is there a more attractive or inviting location for a summer resort than Long Pine,” and that its development was a matter of course, dependent on “local enterprise,” before thousands of health-seekers and vacationers were flocking to this picturesque little town. The company set false hopes on

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<sup>57</sup> Sioux City and Pacific, *Elkhorn Valley*, 38, 40; Earl Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957): 16.

Long Pine, however, for it never earned a reputation for any sort of resort in the late nineteenth century nor in the twentieth.<sup>58</sup>

Central Plains railroad companies capitalized on nineteenth century beliefs about health and climate, including aspects of climatotherapy. Climate therapy became less accepted by the early 1900s, however. The realization that sanatoria could promote health recovery more effectively than “ideal” climates led in part to the downfall of climatotherapy. Perhaps of greater importance, the understanding that tuberculosis stemmed from a microorganism rather than from climate or an inherited condition helped diminish belief in climatotherapy. In addition, according to Price, “At the beginning of the twentieth century, better educated physicians and enlightened laymen recognized that tuberculosis was the result of a complex interaction of biological, medical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors.” While retaining at least a few advocates throughout the first half of the twentieth century, climatotherapy in the United States became reduced to a pseudoscience by the early 1940s.<sup>59</sup>

Neither Nebraska nor Kansas developed any sort of resorts along the lines of a Colorado Springs or Manitou, much to the chagrin of railroad companies eager for land sales in the central Plains. Indeed, some scholars mention former central Plains residents as among the health-seekers found in southern California and the Southwest. Baur notes

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<sup>58</sup> Sioux City and Pacific, *Elkhorn Valley*, 38, 40. (It is interesting to note that in a brochure from only the year before, in 1883, the Sioux City and Pacific made no elaborate descriptions of Long Pine. It simply stated “Here the romantic scenery begins. But as romance is not the object of either writer or reader, we stop only a moment to say that in this region, . . . is some nice farm land, while in many spots there is a chance for the herdman [sic].” See their brochure *Northern Nebraska*, 33. On Colorado narrow-gauge rides, see Pomeroy, *In Search of Golden West*, 22, 56.

that an Illinois man, upon relocating for health reasons to Escondido in southern California in 1895, found that invalids from his own state and Nebraska were the most prevalent among the health-seekers there. Price cites a study done by the National Tuberculosis Association in 1920 that included Nebraska and Kansas as among the eleven states whose citizens made up half of all those who migrated to the Southwest. Obviously the central Plains did not provide a healthful environment for a significant portion of its residents, contrary to the railroads' claims.<sup>60</sup>

The region also failed to become a renowned health destination. Such a country did not offer the high mountain air or rugged scenery of Colorado, nor did settlers likely find a consistently sunny and mild climate, despite such promises by the railroads. The Great Plains climate has long earned a reputation for extreme weather, while parts of the Southwest still attract at least some health-seekers and thousands of older individuals looking to enjoy retirement in dry and sunny climates. The central Plains has not evolved nationally or internationally as any sort of health or resort destination, disproving the railroads' grandiose claims and predictions of the late nineteenth century and underscoring their relentless campaign for profit.

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<sup>59</sup> Price, "Tuberculosis," 8, 89-90, 157. For evidence identifying some advocates of climatotherapy after the turn of the century, see Julius Lane Wilson, "The Western Frontier and Climate Therapy," *The Journal-lancet* 86 (December 1966): 566; Rogers, "Rise and Decline," 15.

<sup>60</sup> Baur, "Health Seekers and Southern California," 350; Price, "Tuberculosis," 103-05.

### *Chapter Three:*

## **In the Right Latitude: The “Civilized” Central Great Plains and Its Destined Renown**

Railroad companies' pervasive references to the healthy benefits and temperate climate of the central Great Plains seemed to emphasize one aspect of the garden waiting beyond the Missouri. Another facet of that garden, that of progressive civilization, also governed a significant portion of late nineteenth century railroad literature on Kansas and Nebraska. To attract emigrants concerned with entering an “untamed wilderness,” the railroads made frequent and varied attempts to allay any such fears. One such attempt utilized a geographical determinist theory that claimed certain latitudes and central areas inevitably produced superior cultural and commercial societies. Another strategy railroads employed emphasized the civilized characteristics already attendant upon the central Plains, such as the existence of schools, churches, and newspapers. They also portrayed the central Plains as a country witnessing the unstoppable advance of civilization as evidenced by such vanquished elements of the Great Plains as the Indian and the buffalo. Through marketing ploys such as these, railroad companies continued on their determined pursuit of corporate profit. This chapter discusses these promotional methods through the context of examples found in post-Civil War railroad literature of the central Great Plains.



The nineteenth century gave rise to geographical and environmental theories that explained the development of various human civilizations and predicted the creation of future ones. Such belief in environmental determinism took firm hold in American thought in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. Emphasizing geographic and climatic conditions as the primary factors influencing the history and activity of humanity's various races and nationalities, environmental determinism claimed that a society's natural surroundings affected all aspects of its development. Ellen Churchill Semple, renowned environmental determinist of the early twentieth century, believed that "geographic conditions influenced social and economic development through the quality of the available natural resources, human productivity, and the natural possibilities for industry and commerce."<sup>1</sup>

Several urban promoters used geographical determinist theories to prove the greatness destined for their cities. St. Louis booster Logan U. Reavis, for example, believed that a temperate zone produced the most illustrious civilizations and empires. He also argued that the Mississippi River and its basin were on course for attaining commercial fame. Because he gave much credence to the theory that ". . .the centers of the great civilizations of the past--Athens, Rome, Paris, London and New York--had been the primary recipients of the massive westward-driving migrations of the past," St Louis was marked as the next recipient of such a migration that would bring about its greatness as a city.

Theories developed in the nineteenth century by German geographer Alexander von Humboldt greatly influenced Reavis' ideas, as well as the beliefs of Chicago booster D.C.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Peet, "The Social Origins of Environmental Determinism," *Annals of the Association of American*

Brooks. Brooks used Humboldt's theories of an Isothermal Zodiac and Axis of Intensity (explained below) to prove that Chicago would not only recover from its 1871 fire, but that inevitably it would become a preeminent commercial center.<sup>2</sup>

Theories such as those of Reavis and Brooks are reflected in late nineteenth century railroad literature of the central Great Plains. However, the versatile William Gilpin likely exerted the greatest influence on western American boosterism in general. His extensive writings reached a wide audience and significantly impacted Americans' view of the West. Ideas he advocated, quite similar to those of other boosters such as Reavis and Brooks, infiltrated railroad advertising in the roads' attempts to attract settlers to Kansas and Nebraska.<sup>3</sup>

Using ideas derived from theories developed by Alexander von Humboldt, Gilpin postulated the existence of an Isothermal Zodiac about thirty to thirty-three degrees in width that encircled the globe across the Northern Hemisphere. This zodiac produced humankind's greatest civilizations and established humanity's westward migratory paths. It held seventy-five percent of the world's land, he estimated, as well as ninety percent of the world's population. The zodiac also contained almost all the white races and commercial and industrial endeavors of "the civilized world." For Gilpin, only within the

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*Geographers* 75:3 (September 1985): 317, 319-20.

<sup>2</sup> J. Christopher Schnell and Katherine B. Clinton, "The New West: Themes in Nineteenth Century Urban Promotion, 1815-1880," *Bulletin of Missouri Historical Society* 30:2 (January 1974): 80-81, 84, 87. Schnell and Clinton also include William Gilpin and Jesup Wakeman Scott as other promoters that subscribed to Humboldt's theories. See footnote 25, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> On the significance of Gilpin's published work in affecting settlement of the West, J. Christopher Schnell asserts that G. Malcolm Lewis and Charles N. Glaab "reinforce the thesis that Gilpin's promotional work was quite effective as a factor that induced settlement of the cis-Rocky Mountain West. That his promotion reached thousands of immigrants is evidenced by the fact that he wrote so many promotional tracts in numerous gold handbooks, emigrant guides, and other pieces. The amount of his material is impressive in itself. Added to this literature are his basic promotional books, pamphlets, letters, and speeches." J. Christopher Schnell, "William Gilpin and the Destruction of the Desert Myth" *The Colorado Magazine* 46:2 (1969): 144, and see p. 137.

Isothermal Zodiac or belt has “the column of the human family . . . marched from east to west since the birth of time.”

He also incorporated into his theory Humboldt’s Axis of Intensity, “an undulating line,” Gilpin claimed, that ran inside the Isothermal Zodiac approximately along the fortieth latitude and one that held a mean annual temperature of 52 degrees Fahrenheit. On the Axis of Intensity found within the isothermal belt or zodiac “have been constructed the great primary cities, which have been from age to age the foci from which have radiated intellectual activity and power.” Gilpin theorized further that “periodical migratory and military movements of the human masses” have continually used the axis as their path of migration, and that such masses “seek instinctively a temperate and congenial warmth” found along the axis.<sup>4</sup>

Gilpin also believed that North America’s geographical configuration led to a concentration of peaceful, socially harmonious elements not found in Europe, Asia, South America or Africa. The North American continent curved inward from its mountain ranges into a concave bowl, he surmised, with the Mississippi basin forming the center. Congenial forces naturally flowed into this center, whereas Europe’s Alps and Asia’s

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<sup>4</sup> Schnell claims Humboldt’s Axis of Intensity ran approximately along the 39th latitude, while Gilpin himself placed it at the 40th latitude. For the information for these two paragraphs, see Schnell, “William Gilpin,” 136-37; Bernard DeVoto, “Geopolitics with the Dew on It” *Harper’s Magazine* 188:1126 (March 1944): 315; Charles N. Glaab, “Visions of Metropolis: William Gilpin and Theories of City Growth in the American West” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 45:1 (Autumn 1961): 24; William Gilpin, *The Cosmopolitan Railway: Compacting and Fusing Together All the World’s Continents* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890): 207-08, 296. My primary source for Gilpin’s ideas is his *Cosmopolitan Railway*. Although published late in the nineteenth century, it is based on his earlier work and ideas. Glaab maintains that “Gilpin had formulated his ideas of the West by 1846,” and that “in his last book, *The Cosmopolitan Railway*, he attempted a more formally organized piece of writing, but it, too, relied on his earlier speeches and articles.” See Glaab, “Visions of Metropolis,” 24. Wallace Stegner claims that by 1860 Gilpin had developed his ideas on “America’s continental mission” in his *Central Gold Region* book. Gilpin would repeat such ideas “with additions in 1873 as *The Mission of the North American People*, and extend its ideas in 1890 in *The Cosmopolitan Railway*.” See Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954): 2.

Himalayas form a convex shape that leads to disunity. Their rivers run to no central, unifying locality as is found in the Mississippi Valley. Gilpin considered Africa and South America to be similar to Europe and Asia as they too had “parts divided into dislocated fragments,” unlike North America. In sum, “. . . the interior of North America presents, so to speak, an expanded, concave bowl to receive and fuse into harmony whatsoever enters within its rim,” Gilpin believed. “So each of the other continents,” he further reasoned, “presenting the convex surface of a bowl reversed, scatter everything from a central apex in radial distraction.”<sup>5</sup>

North America, however, was destined to “be filled up,” at which time “the affiliation of mankind will be accomplished, and the remotest nations grouped together and fused into one universal and convenient system of immediate relationship.” Furthermore, in Gilpin’s mind, both North America’s and the Mississippi basin’s geographical center were found in Kansas at the Smoky Hill and Republican rivers’ confluence which forms the Kansas River. This significance of centrality derives in part from its position “equidistant from and exactly in the middle between the two halves of the human family.” Gilpin seems to imply here the importance a center has in fusing together the brotherhood of humankind as well as in producing the ultimate commercial and industrial accomplishments predestined to occur.

He failed to be consistent in his determination of a geographical center, however, for he also claimed that the state of Colorado “occupies the centre, and forms the apex of the North American continent.” This centrality marked Colorado out for social and political importance in American society. Because “the course of empire is still westward,” the

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<sup>5</sup> Gilpin, *Cosmopolitan Railway*, 297-98. Also, information taken from Glaab, “Visions of Metropolis,”

center of population would shift to Colorado. At such a time, “when the nation’s capital shall eventually be removed from the banks of the Potomac, it will naturally find its permanent site in the shadows of the continental divide.”

Despite his theoretical inconsistencies, Gilpin made clear the importance of a geographical center for both the natural, foreordained scheme of worldwide harmony unfolding on the North American continent, and for the United States’ individual role in such an overall plan. Speaking to an audience in Kansas City in 1858, Gilpin spelled out the significance of a central location: “We, then, the people of the centre, are upon the lines of intense and intelligent energy, where civilization has its largest field, its highest developments, its inspired form.”<sup>6</sup>

Parts of theories such as Gilpin’s appeared in various promotional literature put out by railroads after the Civil War. The idea of a prosperous central belt running through the United States interested railroad boosters significantly, for they used it to promote lands which lay within it. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, for example, through the writing of R.L. Thomas, claimed that the Upper Arkansas Valley “forms a part of that remarkable section which lies between the 38th and 44th parallels of north latitude, and has been appropriately named the ‘Great Central Belt of Population, Commerce, and Wealth.’”

Applying this idea only to the United States rather than to a global setting, Thomas urged his readers to consider a map of the United States. In such a study one would “find within these lines of latitude all the great commercial cities, and here concentrated the

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24, and DeVoto, “Geopolitics,” 316.

mass of the population, and the greater proportion of the agricultural, manufacturing, and commercial interests of the nation.” Though comprising only one quarter of United States’ land, this central belt, Thomas explained, contained the majority of Americans and their intellectual and moral achievements, as well as most of their property. “By the census of 1870,” asserted Thomas, “the Central Belt is found to contain TWO-THIRDS of the population, FOUR-FIFTHS of the real and personal property, THREE-FOURTHS of the schools, public libraries, and newspapers, and FOUR-FIFTHS of the churches of the entire country.” Lands lying within such a prosperous zone served to make settlers prosperous themselves, Thomas insinuated.<sup>7</sup>

The Sioux City and Pacific Railroad also borrowed heavily from the idea that latitude determined the course of human migration and accomplishments. “Reliable statistics show that Northern Nebraska is of both the latitude and altitude to which the natural instincts of the race impel the densest population,” it wrote in 1883. As this area of Nebraska lies between the northern latitudes of forty-one and forty-two degrees, such a location puts it within the latitudinal belt of densest U.S. population, according to the data of the Sioux City and Pacific. Adding a particular altitude range with that of latitude, the company claimed that “out of the 29 1/2 millions [out of 50 million] that occupy between latitudes 39 and 43, no less than 12 millions live in latitudes 41 and 43. . . . nearly one-fourth of the entire population of the United States live in latitudes 41 and 42, and three-fifths between altitude 500 and 1,500.”

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<sup>6</sup> Gilpin, *Cosmopolitan Railway*, 295-6, 286-87, 362. Gilpin also had designs on Independence, Missouri at one point in his career. See Glaab, “Visions of Metropolis,” 26-29. On the importance of a central location for other boosters and writers, see Schnell and Clinton’s “New West.”

<sup>7</sup> R.L. Thomas (Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad), *How and Where to Earn a Living* (Boston: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, 1878): 5-6.

The company felt compelled to add not only a further reminder that these remarkable statistics applied to northeastern Nebraska, but that this area also lay within that magical belt that brought prosperity wherever it ran:

*But these figures, be it remembered, embrace Northeast Nebraska. And it may well be added that the premises herein described are within that girdle of the earth in which there are, by common consent of mankind, the greatest health and the least sickness, . . . and the most gigantic attainment of the human mind. It is something to speak of in this book, and something to think of by those who read it, that Northern Nebraska is within or very near to that girdle of the earth around which sweep forever the strongest currents of electric thought, and within which, from age to age, the greatest achievements of mankind are made in knowledge and industrial art.*<sup>8</sup>

Echoing theories like Gilpin's almost exactly, the company connected the latitude containing their lands with the birth of great cities in the United States and in the world at large. Gilpin claimed that along the Axis of Intensity "have arisen successively the great cities of China and of India, of Babylon, Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, Paris, London, in the older continents." As for the North American continent, the axis produced "New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore; Pittsburg[sic], Cincinnati, and St. Louis." The Sioux City and Pacific made very similar claims, for it seemed proud that its lands in northern Nebraska rested "nearly in the same belt" as such cities (perhaps less illustrious than Gilpin's examples) as Des Moines, Milwaukee, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Albany, and Boston. As for the wider significance of this particular latitude, the company emphasized traditional gender expectations as it claimed that "on the other side of the globe it takes in

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<sup>8</sup> Sioux City and Pacific Railroad, *Northern Nebraska Considered Geographically, Topographically, Geologically, and Experimentally* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review & Herald Steam Printing House, 1883): 4-5. Baltensperger also noted the use of latitude in booster literature, including railroad literature. See his "Plains Promoters and Plain Folk," 189-90.

Paris, Rome, and Constantinople, and that wonderful Caucasia, where have ever lived the strongest men and the most beautiful women of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Still mirroring theories such as Gilpin’s in a publication a year later, but restricting it to the United States rather than putting it in a global context, the Sioux City and Pacific proclaimed that Nebraska’s Elkhorn Valley lay in that special belt that produced the best of America’s achievements:

[The Elkhorn Valley] has AN ENVIABLE LOCATION in the heart of the great middle belt of the union--a strip of country not more than 400 miles wide, and embracing all the great commercial, financial and railway centres; all the great universities; 90 per cent of the manufacturing interests; the great grain, grass, fruit and dairy regions, the finest school systems and the densest and strongest population of the country.<sup>10</sup>

Writing in a book subtly promoting Burlington and Missouri railroad lands, Professor James D. Butler espoused many of the theories postulated by promoters such as Gilpin, but ignored their supposed global application and instead focused on them as theories explaining the progress of the United States. Under the heading THE AMERICAN ZONE OF POPULATION, Butler claimed that a “dense and westward-spreading population, however, has hitherto chosen a *central belt*,” which approximates in width the latitudinal length of Illinois (which state’s north to south length matches closely the latitudinal boundaries of the entire region of Kansas and Nebraska). He maintained that a “Latitude of the Union” existed, forming a belt about four hundred miles wide and three thousand miles long. Nearly two-thirds of the country lived within no more than one-fourth of this belt that passed through the central Great Plains. Butler

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<sup>9</sup> Gilpin, *Cosmopolitan Railway*, 362; Sioux City and Pacific, *Northern Nebraska*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Sioux City and Pacific Railway, *The Elkhorn Valley on the S.C. & P.Ry in Nebraska* (n.p.: Sioux City and Pacific Railway,[1884]): 1.



found several important routes, lines, and boundaries that this belt produced within the last one hundred years:

For a century past, population has gravitated more and more to a zone extending only two or three degrees north and south of latitude 40 degrees, which is that of Philadelphia. It has rolled westward in a gulf stream, with its center in that city--as well as in the National road from Cumberland to Wheeling, Columbus and Indianapolis--and in the line between Kansas and Nebraska, and nearly in the average latitude of the Transcontinental Railroad.

For Butler, the latitudes that spurred the population growth of Illinois likewise brought about the population growth of states west of the Mississippi that included Kansas and Nebraska. The current and future zone for settlement in this western region “lies in the latitude of Illinois--namely, in the States of Iowa, Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska. No one of them extends more than one degree either north or south of Illinois, and population is most sparse where they over-run Illinois latitudes.” Butler later focused on Nebraska, and inferred that as Iowa and Illinois had been successful, and that “a larger proportion of Nebraska than of Iowa lies in the latitude of Illinois, . . .” then for those reasons and others the “manifest destiny of Nebraska” would make that state become a success in no less time than Iowa and Illinois required.

Butler acknowledged the importance of the railroads in bringing about Nebraska’s destiny as a developed and rapidly settled state, but he avowed that without the force of “the parallel along which settlement naturally flows,” the railroads could not possibly have succeeded. “Had their lines been far north or south,” contends Butler, “population would have been no more increased by them than the entrance fees exacted at the gates of

Florence were, when a stupid duke thought to double his revenue by doubling the number of the city gates.”<sup>11</sup>

As part of its title to a promotional pamphlet from 1878, the Burlington and Missouri Railroad cautioned prospective settlers to “Keep in the Right Latitude.” The company apparently hoped to attract settlers from the American latitudes believed to hold the greatest and most successful population that, fortunately for the Burlington and Missouri of course, also included company lands. It warned its readers that “the history of emigration proves that residents of one latitude who have moved to another latitude, whether it be north or south, have almost invariably been unsuccessful.” It invoked the theory that one great belt swept through the country, generating the best industry, intellectual accomplishments, and most popular avenues of travel and settlement. Continuing with Butler’s comparison, the company found the latitudinal boundaries of Illinois to define this wondrous zone:

The geographical position of the lands is perhaps one of the most powerful arguments in their favor. The westward stream of migration has always flowed in one well-defined channel; first from New York and New England to Pennsylvania; thence to Ohio; thence to Indiana and Illinois; thence to Iowa and Missouri, and for the past five years the stream has emptied itself into Nebraska.

This belt of country, bounded north and south by about the north and south lines of the State of Illinois, may be called the heart of the United States, containing, as it does, the great bulk of the population, commerce, wealth and intelligence of the country.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James D. Butler, *Nebraska. Its Characteristics and Prospects* (Omaha: Privately printed, 1873): 4-8, 14. See also Baltensperger’s “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk,” 128, for more information on the importance of a central belt and latitude.

<sup>12</sup> Burlington and Missouri Railroad, *The Old B. & M. Railroad Ahead. Keep in the Right Latitude* (Philadelphia: H.A. Chambers, 1878): 3-4. Mention of the railroads’ use of the theories of westward-moving migration and the “heart” of the country as corresponding to Illinois’ latitudes is also found in Helen Marie Anderson’s “The Influence of Railway Advertising upon the Settlement of Nebraska” (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1926): 30. Also, see Baltensperger’s “Plains Promoters and Plain Folk,” 162, for similar findings.

Union Pacific railroad literature also demonstrates the belief in a central convergence point located in the United States, a theory posited by such promoters as Gilpin. Of benefit to the country and the world, powerful, industrious and harmonious forces would be certain to flow through such a center, according to the basic logic of the theory. The company claimed for northern Kansas the distinction for having “the Geographical Center of North America, where is destined to be the future seat of empire and the granary of the world.” The Union Pacific even mentions a supposed 52 degree mean annual temperature for the area, reminiscent of Humboldt and his adherents’ theory that a temperate climate produced outstanding civilizations. In the case of northern Kansas, according to the company, such a temperature brings about “the production of those great staples which contribute to individual prosperity and the wealth of nations.”<sup>13</sup>

Through the writing of Josiah Copley, the Union Pacific again sought for Kansas fame for its central location. Copley professed a confidence in Kansas’ future greatness because of its centrality. “The centre of Kansas,” he declared, “is very nearly the geographical centre of the United States.” Copley continued:

It may, therefore, with great propriety be called the CENTRAL STATE. This is well, for it is perhaps the most fertile, as it is unquestionably the most beautiful, of the great sisterhood; and through its gushing heart, as I believe, the great artery of the world’s commerce is destined to flow.<sup>14</sup>

While railroads sometimes proffered such pseudo-scientific theories as those espoused by Gilpin and others in order to attract settlers, they often appealed to more realistic and concrete concerns emigrants likely harbored about the lack of civility and

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<sup>13</sup> Union Pacific Railroad, *Kansas Lands* (New York: Trow & Smith Book Manufacturing Company, n.d.): no page number.

<sup>14</sup> Josiah Copley, *Kansas and the Country Beyond, on the Line of the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, from the Missouri to the Pacific Ocean* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1867): 6.

urbanity in western society. Therefore, railroads frequently made reference to the presence of EuroAmerican characteristics of civilized society on the central Plains. Such assertions stemmed from the desire to make this new addition to the United States appear as advanced and cultured as the East.

According to David Hamer in *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier*: “Travel and guidebook authors, railway companies, and the other agencies engaged in promoting emigration constantly publicized and emphasized the ‘Eastern’ or ‘Old World’ characteristics of the cities of the New World.” Hamer found this to be especially true with boosters of western American towns. A proclivity for civil regression existed in the West in the minds of some, if not many, Easterners. In a lecture in 1847, clergyman Dr. Horace Bushnell of Connecticut contended that Westerners had an inclination to “relapse into barbarism.” Such a negative attribute had its underlying causes, in his opinion:

“[It] grew out of the disruption of social, religious, and political ties in the case of those seeking homes in the West--the jarring and heterogeneous character of the social elements, drawn as they are from all quarters of the world--and the unbridled license resulting from the well known disregard, in new communities, of the various restraints by which men are moulded and held in check in the older States.”<sup>15</sup>

Another Easterner, Julian Ralph, writing as late as 1893, indicated that the West was noted “for its gambling, its pistol-carrying, and its generally noisy Sundays.” He distinguished Denver’s attributes as showing both Eastern and Western traits, alleging that “on its worst side the city is Western, and that its moral side is Eastern.” Ralph

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<sup>15</sup> David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990): 79-81 (Bushnell quoted on p. 81).

found strange the apathy displayed toward murders committed among Denver's outlaws and gamblers, yet he noticed how quiet and civil were its Sundays, as in the East.<sup>16</sup>

One author of an 1879 article in the *American Church Review* castigated Westerners for their irreligious habits. They typically defiled the Sabbath with cursing, drinking, and gambling, he argued, and they lived and died in a rough, ungodly manner:

They are crowded together, of every character, and from every clime, resembling the scene often witnessed on the plains of prairie dogs, owls, rattlesnakes, tortoises and horned frogs, living in the same burrow. Many of these roughs have died, as the expressive saying is, "with their boots on," i.e., hung from the telegraph poles, with no time to cast off their boots.<sup>17</sup>

Other writers and observers also found some manner of dissolute and dangerous living in the West. Readers of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1875 received a thrilling firsthand account of the rough and tumble life found in the impermanent railroad terminus towns of the West. An earlier 1868 article in a British magazine run by Charles Dickens averred that America's Far West comprised a place where "nearly everybody goes armed, and it is wonderful how many pistols will flash out when a street fight arises in any Western town,       " In line with this opinion delivered by Dickens' magazine, J.F. Campbell observed in the mid-1870s that "the west is a wild country, and wild spirits roam there."<sup>18</sup>

Making more subtle and detailed observations in an article from 1869 entitled "East and West," G. Nelson Smith outlined distinct differences he saw between the two sides of the United States. He found the East "characterized by age, maturity, permanency, finish,

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<sup>16</sup> Julian Ralph, "Colorado and Its Capital," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 86:516 (May 1893): 939, 942-43.

<sup>17</sup> F. M. McAllister, "The Religious Condition of the Far West and California," *American Church Review* vol. 31 (September and October 1879): 386-87.

wealth, intelligence, refinement and art, coupled with . . . a sort of conscientious caution in trying new things. The West loomed large and seemed marked by “a kind of audacious independence and disregard of all the old land-marks of thought and action,” and it had “an unfinished, unpolished crudeness which is very justly distasteful, if not shocking, to the finer susceptibilities of an older and maturer life.”<sup>19</sup>

Railroad companies made considerable efforts to downplay such images of a wild, uncivilized frontier area that likely caused concern among potential settlers considering a move to the central Great Plains.<sup>20</sup> Railroad companies obviously targeted women with this propaganda that claimed urbanity existed on the newly developing plains of Kansas and Nebraska. Seen as the “civilizers” of society, women held a special interest in establishing proper moral and educational standards for their families and communities.<sup>21</sup>

Yet railroads also likely had men, and not just women, in mind when they played up the progress and sophistication of central Plains’ life. Husbands and fathers, naturally wanting to see their families prosper in a relatively safe setting that promoted the proper upbringing of children, would also have a vital interest in this purported aspect of central Plains’ life. Sandra Myres, in *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915*,

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<sup>18</sup> W.E. Webb, “Air Towns and Their Inhabitants,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 51:306 (November 1875): 828-835; Charles Dickens, “Far-Western Gamblers,” *All the Year Round* Part 114, no. 497 (October 31, 1868): 491; J.F. Campbell, *My Circular Notes*, vol. I (New York: MacMillan and Co., [ca. 1875]): 44.

<sup>19</sup> G. Nelson Smith, “East and West,” *The Western Monthly* 1:3 (March 1869): 159-160. It is interesting to note that Ruth Miller Elson claims that schoolbooks in the latter 1800s painted a positive image of Westerners by attributing to them traditionally Eastern characteristics: “Post-Civil War books in general assign to the Western territories the same characteristics that they found in New England: ‘Their mixed population has, from the first, been remarkable for energy, intelligence, and interest in all public enterprises.’” See Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964): 182.

<sup>20</sup> For the broader political and ideological impetus behind the idea of “civilizing” the West, and the railroads part in this, see David M. Emmons, “The Influence of Ideology on Changing Environmental Images: The Case of Six Gazetteers,” in Brian W. Blouet and Merlin P. Lawson, eds., *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975): 129-131.

finds various instances of concern by both men and women for civil society in the West. Both sexes, although perhaps women more so, felt troubled by the base nature of humanity they found in the trans-Appalachian West, and western “men and women alike decried the lack of churches and other suitable moral and religious institutions.” They both put much “energy and precious time into the reform and reorganization of frontier society.” which included each attending to the establishment of churches and schools. Peace and order in a new and unsettled land were sought by both genders, not just the female segment of society.<sup>22</sup>

Realizing such concerns, the railroads attempted to convince prospective settlers of the civilized life that awaited them on the central Plains. In a Union Pacific emigrant guide, for example, the company boasted to its readers that Cawker City, Kansas, afforded “nearly all the advantages of eastern civilization and society.” It emphasized the quality and type of most settlers presently there as refined Easterners, “thus rendering society the very best.” Of Concordia, Kansas, the company assured doubtful emigrants that “the town has about 1,000 inhabitants, nearly all of whom are Eastern people, well educated, thus giving the new-comer the benefit of the best society.” The population of West Clifton, Kansas, could boast almost all “eastern people, highly cultivated, rendering society the very best.” A desirable New England touch readily showed in Centralia, Kansas, for its “inhabitants are principally New England people of the enterprising class,

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<sup>21</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: “Civilizing” the West? 1840-1880*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998): 107, 116, 130, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982): 22-23, 186, 211.

as the many nicely improved farms, magnificent school houses and churches amply testify.”<sup>23</sup>

One of more than two hundred editors in 1875 writing in a pamphlet produced by the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad concerning the Cottonwood and Arkansas valleys in Kansas, tried to convince readers that people there looked suitably civil and proper. He found Kansans “well clothed, neat, clean and tidy, as a rule.” Kansas had “no great louts running about with one suspender, ragged shoes and tangled hair as long as a horse’s mane.” Over two decades later, near the turn of the century, the company still seemed to battle negative images of an unruly Kansas country. It quoted a Montgomery County, Kansas, newspaper that delineated the favorable, older-settled states that Kansas’ current settlers hailed from. The company, through the words of the newspaper, pointed out the residents’ intelligence, morality, industry, and self-constraint when it came to alcohol:

“Our 25,000 people are mostly from Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio and Missouri, with a liberal immigration from the eastern, northern and a few southern states, and in intelligence, morals and enterprise will compare favorably with those of the states named. The whisky and beer traffic is regarded by our laws along with horse stealing and other crimes, and not a legalized saloon exists in the state--the traffic being illegal and under the ban of society and the law.”

The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe cited the *Salina Herald*’s report of “‘improved morality’” in Saline County, Kansas, due to the decreased number of prisoners in the county jail. “‘During five months the greatest number confined was two, while during one month the roaches were the sole occupants of our bastile[sic].’” Perhaps most

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<sup>23</sup> Union Pacific Railroad, *The Emigrant Guide or Hand-Book of the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad, & c.* (n.p.: Advertising Company, 1878-79): 1, 16, 19, 31. Anderson also noted the railroads’ insistence on the excellent class of people, mainly from the East, already settled in Nebraska. See Anderson, “Influence of Railway,” 36.



impressive, the infamous cattle town Dodge City transformed itself into a respectable, peace-loving community, according to an article in the *Western Homestead and Tribune* of Hutchinson, Kansas, and quoted by the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe. “Look at Dodge City: a few years ago a wild and woolly western town,” the newspaper reported. It had “saloons on every corner; gambling-houses in full blast. Now a quiet, peaceable, prosperous town of 3,000 people, good schools, seven churches. The pulpits filled with eloquent divines, and not a saloon in town.” Obviously railroad companies felt the need to dissuade prospective settlers of the notion that the central Plains harbored lawless and immoral characters, a type of people considered endemic in a EuroAmerican frontier.<sup>24</sup>

Nebraska also had its share of quality Easterners, at least in the view of railroad companies that had vested interests in the settlement of country north of the Kansas border. In an attempt to portray southeastern Nebraska as a region peopled with upstanding residents, the Burlington and Missouri attributed the area’s settlement to “sterling people from Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the Eastern States.”

Such people gave Nebraska “the very best class, both as to intelligence, morality and financial condition.” Nebraska, in terms of its educational, social, and religious institutions, compared favorably with any other region double its age. Easterners and settlers from the Middle States constituted the fine makeup of people found there, helping to ensure that “. . . law and order are as safely established here as anywhere in the world.”

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<sup>24</sup> Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, *Kansas in 1875. Strong and Impartial Testimony to the Wonderful Productiveness of the Cottonwood and Arkansas Valleys*. (Topeka, Kans.: Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad Company, 1875): 24; Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, “*What’s the Matter with Kansas?*” (n.p.: Passenger Department Santa Fe Route, July, 1898): 63, 77, 72.

Much to the relief of any quiet, peaceful emigrant seeking a home on the central Plains, “the rowdy element has never obtained a foothold in Nebraska.”<sup>25</sup>

Many years later, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad advertised the cultural atmosphere of settlements in Nebraska. Farmers’ institutes, Chautauquas employing the nation’s finest talents, teachers’ associations, and neighborhood social organizations “for mutual improvement and intellectual advancement,” all comprised part of the cultured life found in that young state west of the Missouri River. As further evidence, “the fact that the free libraries in the city of Lincoln alone hold over 100,000 volumes, is a fair indication of what the people of the state at large feel and practice in the matter of general and special culture.” Old cultural and moral values from eastern states prevail, the company avowed, indicating once again the importance railroads placed on projecting a sophisticated, Eastern cultural image when promoting the central Great Plains.<sup>26</sup>

The Missouri Pacific Railway reveals much in a few words about the West’s rough and dangerous image held by Easterners, an image that railroad promoters sought to change. In a brochure from 1892, the Missouri Pacific claimed that Nebraska had been blessed with upright, moral emigrants early in its history. As if trying to allay fears commonly held about the West, the company declared that “the lawless disturbances, ruffianism and border outlawry which disgraced many western communities had but a limited sway in the early days of Nebraska.” To sell land on the central Great Plains, or

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<sup>25</sup> Burlington and Missouri, *Old B. & M. Ahead*, 21, 5, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, *Great Opportunities for Farmers, Business Men and Investors in Nebraska, Northwestern Kansas and Eastern Colorado* (Chicago: Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, 1892): 29.

to hope for the business from potential homesteaders, railroad companies had to assure emigrant families of the West's safety.

The people of Elkhorn Valley in northern Nebraska enjoyed a society "quite as intelligent and refined as in the older eastern states and much more rational," in the opinion of the Sioux City and Pacific Railway in 1884. No "cant and dogmatism" oppress these westerners, and far fewer "exact[ing] social constraints of older society in the east" burden those of this Nebraska valley. Law, order and social refinement abound as much in the Elkhorn Valley as in "the model New England village." The company emphasized, in particularly exaggerated form, the cosmopolitan character of this astonishingly remarkable group of first-class people removed from older, more established regions to the new lands of northern Nebraska:

They hail from the older American states, the Canadas, British Isles and Europe and have in large measure the intelligence, easy self-command, liberal and comprehensive views, personal and public enterprise and progressive temper born of cosmopolitan conditions. They are exceptionally free from provincial conceit and prejudice, are brave, faithful, confident and hospitable and in all the better elements of progressive human living, represent the best phases of our genial and advancing western civilization.<sup>27</sup>

Railroads displayed further proof of a civilized and sophisticated society on the central Plains by proudly pointing to the existence of mail, newspapers, schools and churches. Such institutions and amenities showed order, morality, sophistication, and intelligence in a western settlement.

Mail and newspapers attested to a community's progress, suggested the Burlington and Missouri. Howard County in Nebraska exemplified "social, material and intellectual progress," for it exhibited "good society, prosperous farmers, numerous schools and

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<sup>27</sup> Sioux City and Pacific Railway, *Elkhorn Valley*, 8.

churches, a newspaper, and daily mails.” The Union Pacific, through the pen of J.T. Allan, also commented on the importance of mail and newspapers a few years later in 1882, but with more detailed emphasis. Frequent mail brings more newspapers, he rationalized, which in turn creates a more literate and informed citizenry:

The mail facilities furnished by the railroads to the whole west is an important feature in its progress. Where once was a weekly or monthly mail, now it is delivered daily, and the daily papers are received as regularly as if they were delivered in the cities where published. This causes the wide spread of the news of the world, more reading among all classes, and higher civilization. The influence of the newspapers is a most important one in the world--none appreciate the fact more than the people of the west.

After enumerating the number and types of newspapers available in Nebraska, Allan affirmed that “the support which these papers receive in their different localities tells of the intelligence of the people.”<sup>28</sup>

Churches and schools generally merited more attention than mail and newspapers in the railroads’ attempts to persuade emigrants that morality and sophistication prevailed on the central Plains. Two important symbols of civilization and progress, these institutions were pointed out with pride by railroad companies in the hopes that such institutions would attract more settlers. The Missouri Pacific claimed that churches and schools received nearly first consideration among Nebraska’s initial settlers. These pioneers “set the highest value upon the civilizing influences of ‘the little red school house,’ and they recognized that religious liberty and freedom of thought was one of the corner-stones absolutely necessary in the foundation of a free State.”

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<sup>28</sup> Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, *The Great North Platte Region of B. & M. Railroad Lands* (n.p.: A. Gast and Co., [ca.1878]): 28; J.T. Allan (Union Pacific Railway), *Nebraska and the Territories as Developed by Railroad Building and Operation* (Omaha: Land Department of the Union Pacific Railway Company, 1882): 10, 7.

The company boasted that church and school buildings ranked among the best as they were among the earliest built in a community. It also gave extensive attention to provisions made for a school fund as well as describing Nebraska's several institutions of higher learning. Perhaps most attractive for potential settlers concerned with education, the Missouri Pacific claimed that the nation's census revealed Nebraska as the state lowest in illiteracy in proportion to population. "This fact alone is sufficient to commend the State to the favorable notice of men who are looking for a new home," it stated. The company underscored the importance of literacy for a free and happy community:

Illiteracy is the handmaiden of poverty and illogical laws, and the foe of liberty. Where illiterate men predominate, the church and the school house, with all their civilizing and humanizing influences, have no power to bless. On the other hand, that State is the greatest, freest and happiest where religion and learning have the best opportunities for development.

Such quality education existed in Nebraska that J.T. Allan, for the Union Pacific, averred that Easterners and foreigners came to Nebraska not only for the wealth of its land, but also for "that solid education which is the birthright of every settler in Nebraska."<sup>29</sup>

Various newspaper editors, quoted in an Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad pamphlet, acclaimed Kansas for its quality education. "One of the best products of Kansas soil is the school house," wrote one editor. A Kansan's home may be a soddie, but the all-important school building could not be made of such material. Brick, stone, or a wood frame with paint comprised the materials, the editor noted, implying the importance Kansans put on education. As additional proof of Kansans' dedication to

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<sup>29</sup> Missouri Pacific Railway, *Statistics and Information Concerning the State of Nebraska, Taken from State and National Reports, Showing the Advantages, and Giving Information for the Farmer, the Mechanic, the Laborer, the Merchant, the Manufacturer, . . .* (St. Louis: Woodward & Tiernan Printing Co., [1892]): 19-30 (quotes from 19, 20); Anderson also notes the railroads' mention of solid education existing in Nebraska. See Anderson, "Influence of Railway," 36. J.T. Allan, *Nebraska and the Territories*, 11-12.

education, the editor alleged that the state enjoyed a percentage of school attendance among children nearly as high as that established New England state of Massachusetts. Another editor wrote glowingly of Kansas' educational system, attesting that "the ample provisions for education, in so newly-settled a country, justly excite the admiration and surprise of all who visit the State for the first time."<sup>30</sup> Clearly Kansas' schools could compete with those back East.

Another theme related to the portrayal of civilization on the central Plains used by the railroads in vying for more settlers claimed that pioneering hardships inherent in settling a new country no longer existed in Nebraska and Kansas.<sup>31</sup> Emigrants had the fortunate opportunity to obtain land and settle in a region without undergoing the laborious task of taming a new country. Civilization had already been established there by earlier settlers, making for new-comers a more comfortable and familiar life than the first pioneers had experienced.

The Missouri Pacific made this point by entreating land-seekers to forsake the rush for Oklahoma land then going on in the early 1890s, and instead choose among the millions of acres yet left in Nebraska. Population would increase in Nebraska faster than before, the company believed, and more population meant better value for land. It insinuated that Nebraska held the better offer for the future, not Oklahoma. Such a new country as Oklahoma lacked the basic amenities of a civilized society, and the land remained "unconquered." The Missouri Pacific condemned the trend whereby "men flock by thousands to occupy the wild and unsubdued lands of Oklahoma, where the laws have yet to be framed, the school houses and churches to be built, and the land wrested

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<sup>30</sup> Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, *Kansas in 1875*, 23.

from savagery, . . . .” Nebraska, however, “where the arduous labors of the pioneers are over, and where, under beneficent laws, free schools and temples of worship, the great column of civilization has already taken up its march,” held more advantages for the present and the future.<sup>32</sup>

The Burlington and Missouri encouraged the prospective settler to take up land in eastern Nebraska “where the work of development has been fully completed, and the new arrival finds himself surrounded by every convenience of civilization afforded by the oldest and most improved sections of the country.” Eastern Kansas in 1878 also offered a ready-made civilization for the settler on the Pottawatomie Reserve, suggested R.L. Thomas for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe. Those who resided there could enjoy many natural advantages native to the region, but they also had at their disposal churches, railroads, schools, and a desirable social element, all created within the past twenty years by earlier settlers. “Thus, while the settler on the reserve is emphatically in a *new country*, he is decidedly within the fully developed civilization of an old country.”<sup>33</sup>

A few years later, in 1880, the Union Pacific also promoted Kansas as a place devoid of crude frontier living. Not only was the state on par with Eastern culture, the company carefully pointed out, but in some regards it was superior to it. Such a situation could only seem inviting to land-hungry Easterners, the Union Pacific hoped. It assured its readers that no bleak vista awaited them or that any “uncouth” elements such as Indians, buffalo or coyotes remained. Exhibiting a picture of a sturdy church built of magnesian limestone sitting prominently against the backdrop of a vast prairie land and sky, the

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<sup>31</sup> This theme is also briefly cited in Anderson’s “Influence of Railway,” 37.

<sup>32</sup> Missouri Pacific Railway, *Statistics and Information*, 15-16.

company assured prospective emigrants that it “does not invite its land purchasers to a section the settlement in which imposes upon them the disagreeable and laborious task of reclaiming the land from the dominion of the Savage, the Buffalo and the Cayote [sic].”

The Union Pacific pledged that a desolate, backward land of gloom strewn with buffalo remains and prairie dog villages did not exist in Kansas. No man need fear tearing his family away from an established community, “transferring them from scenes and surroundings of civilization and society into the midst of such barbarous relics,” it declared. Instead, Kansas offered an even better life, claimed the UP:

We invite you to a section which being so much better adapted to the wants of civilized man, so much nearer of access, having better climatic advantages, being more healthful, more fertile, and therefore more habitable, was reclaimed from the Indian and the Buffalo a quarter of a century ago, and now presents the aspect of an old civilized country, having advantages inexpressibly superior to many of the sections of older States from which we invite you to come hither.<sup>34</sup>

A final example of themes representing attempts to sell the central Great Plains as a sophisticated, civilized country involves the idea that evolutionary processes were phasing out “uncivilized” members of the Plains. This elimination of savagery meant that progress, as EuroAmericans understood it, would predominate. The railroads, therefore, attempted not only to paint a picture of central Plains’ culture and modernity that rivaled the East’s, but also to point out the inevitable decline of barbarous elements.

For example, the Sioux City and Pacific predicted an imminent demise in northern Nebraska, due to modern development, for the apparently greedy and corrupt ranch owner and his cowboys. “And the time is near at hand,” the company prophesied, “when under

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<sup>33</sup> Burlington and Missouri in Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad’s, *Great Opportunities*, 30; Thomas, *How and Where*, 24-25.

<sup>34</sup> Union Pacific Railroad, *Farms and Homes in Kansas* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., Printers, 1880): no page number.



the transforming impulses of steam and electricity, law, learning and religion will rule where the Ranchman is now Feudal Lord, and the cow-boy his loyal Knight.” It also foresaw the dissolution of such common sights on the Plains as forts and Indian encampments as the implacable forces of progress charted out new paths for EuroAmerican civilization in northern Nebraska:

Here, too, are the Indian camps and the military posts, whose benign patronage as refuges and markets will be withdrawn in the future, only to give place to railroad cities when the cities of the hills beyond, rich in all mineral wealth, shall be brought to their gates by the swift-footed locomotive.<sup>35</sup>

In the late 1870s, the Union and Pacific advertised Kansas as a state free from Indian attacks, with the Indians finally resigning themselves to the forces of white society. The last confrontation occurred around 1870, it claimed, and since then “the hostile tribes have steadily manifested a disposition to abide by their treaty stipulations, and so far as this homestead country is concerned, to fully relinquish it to civilization.”<sup>36</sup>

J.W Norton, writing in 1869 as part of a promotion for the Union and Kansas Pacific Railways, indicated the route Indians and buffaloes were fated to take in western civilization’s march across the continent. Quoting the *Missouri Democrat*, which initially noted the excellent grain production of Kansas, Norton makes his point about the native buffalo and Indian:

But a few years ago the spot from whence this grain was clipped was the haunt of the prowling red man and the home of the vast herds of buffalo. Now the wigwam has vanished for ever, and in its place has been reared the quiet home of the western farmer. The shaggy fronts of the buffalo are a thing of story, and where they so recently grazed the patient ox and mild-eyed cow nip the rich herbage. “Westward the Star of Empire takes its way.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Sioux City and Pacific, *Northern Nebraska*, 25, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Union Pacific, *Emigrant Guide*, 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> J.W. Norton (Union and Kansas Pacific Railways), *Emigration to Kansas, the Glory of the West* (n.p.: Kansas Land & Emigration Company, [1869]): 9.

A few years earlier, Josiah Copley wrote a promotional piece for the Union Pacific Railway in which he too, although in words stronger than Norton's, spoke about the inevitable extinction of the Indian and buffalo. He believed "the wave of civilized life," which did not include the buffalo or the Indian, progressed under the lead of the Union Pacific Railway. Although he had some sympathy for Indians, claiming that the "savage's" eternal fate promised a better outcome than that of the white men responsible for atrocities committed against him, Copley still easily accepted what destiny had in store for all the inhabitants of the central Plains:

The Indians and the buffaloes are rapidly melting away before the resistless march of a stronger race. Before this mighty onward movement all that cannot be assimilated must be destroyed. The buffalo cannot be domesticated, nor the Indian civilized, so they are apparently alike devoted to extermination. Both are surrounded; the cordon of civilization is pressing closer and closer around them, and the issue, so far as we can see, is as inevitable as fate.<sup>38</sup>

The Burlington and Missouri also saw impending doom for a variety of other Plains' dwellers in Nebraska. Speaking of the prairie dog and its supposed housemates, the rattlesnake and the owl, the company noted almost poetically that "all three, like the Indian aborigines, vanish before civilization, as the morning steals upon the night chasing the darkness." The company further indicated that the railroad, and therefore its implied civilizing force, will advance through the Otoe reservation as the Indians there forego their tribal system, as other tribes had already done, and embrace the dominant social organization, it can be inferred, of the Anglo-Americans. This process will occur "as

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<sup>38</sup> Josiah Copley, *Kansas and the Country Beyond*, 26.

those Indians become more civilized,” for then “they will petition Congress to abolish their tribal organization, as some Wisconsin tribes did last year.”<sup>39</sup>

Butler, in writing for the Burlington and Missouri, also suggested that civilized society had conquered the Indians, for those “who now remain in Nebraska are settled on reservations, and have lost their teeth and claws.” As if to underscore how harmless, if not ridiculous, Indians had become, Butler recounted an amusing story about the Otoes that he had written about in a letter to a friend. ““For years the Quakers have had the Otoes in hand,”” he explained, ““and have labored to elevate them, . . . .”” Philadelphia Quaker women were appalled upon learning that the Otoe women had no bonnets for their heads. They sent one hundred westward, then, and the Nebraska missionary’s wife fit each Otoe woman with one of these new head coverings, which the Otoe men soon confiscated for themselves.

Since ““no Otoe brave can sit down between sunrise and sunset, without disgrace,”” Butler pointed out, ““ . . . the dress of the Otoe brave is provided with a “crow cushion” so contrived as to prick him in the seat of honor as soon as he begins to sit down.”” The men thus considered the bonnets unnecessary for the women, but useful for themselves as crow cushions. ““The next day the squaws appeared bareheaded, but each warrior was tricked out with a bonnet, not on his head, but as a panier, on quite another part of his person.””

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<sup>39</sup> Burlington and Missouri Railroad, *Views and Descriptions of Burlington & Missouri River Railroad Lands, with Important Information Concerning Where and How to Select and Purchase Farms in Iowa and Nebraska, on Ten Years' Credit* (Burlington, Iowa, and Lincoln, Nebr.: Land Department of the Burlington & Mo. River Railroad Co., [ca. 1872]; no page numbers, see #14 and #5.

The Otoes not only were acquiescing to white man ways, the story seems to imply, but had become harmless to the point that once fierce warriors now appeared tame and ludicrous to a sophisticated observer.<sup>40</sup>

The idea that traditional notions of civilization existed on the central Great Plains, or that the region's destiny led to superior commercial and intellectual achievements, formed part of the railroads' advertising arsenal in their attempt to lure settlers beyond the Missouri. Their use of pseudo-scientific theories based on those such as Gilpin's, insinuating that geographical forces regulated the course of history, may or may not have attracted settlers to the central Great Plains after the Civil War. Perhaps some readers of railroad promotionals could not accept these theories that rested so desperately on such imaginative, unfounded and unscientific beliefs. Theories put out by those like Gilpin's leaned heavily on environmental determinism and ignored the reality of human choice in effecting the course of history and the development of human society. Theorists like Gilpin used "mythology" and "rhetoric," failed to see or work with facts, and pushed "fantasy upon a public and government understandably ignorant of the facts."<sup>41</sup> What percentage of the "ignorant public" believed geographical theories pushed by western boosters cannot be accurately determined, but such promotional ideas may have helped persuade at least a few to come West.

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<sup>40</sup> Butler, *Nebraska*, 9-10.

<sup>41</sup> Fred A. Shannon, *An Appraisal of Walter Prescott Webb's The Great Plains: A Study in Institutions and Environment* (New York: Social Science Research Council, [1940]): 181; Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954): 6, 49.

Quite possibly the more realistic approach railroads took by asserting that Eastern cultural and societal values took hold on the Plains proved more enticing to emigrant families. Yet it cannot be ascertained just how much influence the railroads' pitch for sophisticated life exerted. The lure of free or cheap land may have won out over all other considerations and concerns of many individuals and families.

However believable any of their claims, the railroads earnestly emphasized the civilized side of life on the central Great Plains, hoping to attract those emigrants, and aiming especially at those with families, who feared wild and untamed frontiers. Any such images of wildness had to be eliminated and potential settlers must believe, in the words of railroad promoter Josiah Copley, that "God's own hand has planted a garden here, and all that is required of man is that he shall go in and occupy, and dress it, and keep it."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Josiah Copley, *Kansas and the Country Beyond*, 26.

## *Conclusion*

Railroad companies promoting land beyond the Missouri River in post-Civil War America promised settlers a garden-like, healthy land destined for greatness and already peopled by sophisticated, cultured inhabitants. Railroads hoped claims such as these would convince the potential settler to buy company land grants or take up government homesteads, as increased population meant more business for the railroads. Which of these claims emigrants believed, and to what degree, cannot be determined, but it is reasonable to assume that such claims helped lure settlers to the central Great Plains.

Perhaps the more important question to ask, however, is whether any of these claims rang true in the subsequent history of the central Great Plains. Culturally the Great Plains as a whole has failed to gain renown for cultural sophistication in its approximately 140 years of EuroAmerican development. Indeed, a few Americans today believe that some frontier conditions still exist in everyday life in western states such as those of the Great Plains. The Great Plains region also did not develop universities that rivaled Harvard or Stanford in prestige, nor did any great national or international metropolitan center emerge in fulfillment of boomers' visions such as William Gilpin's.

The railroads' assertion that a salubrious, temperate climate awaited the emigrant taking up land in Kansas and Nebraska would hardly be credible today, (except perhaps for the claims for pure air) as this region is noted for harsh and extreme weather. The companies' contention that consumptive victims found relief on the central Plains is

somewhat borne out in statistics for 1890, as the western half of Kansas and the majority of western Nebraska were found to be in a region that enjoyed one of the lowest death rates from consumption in the country.<sup>1</sup> But statistics can be deceiving, and more information is needed before one can make any definitive conclusions about a region's healthful climate.

Of greater importance when considering railroad promises, the desert/garden image deserves more detailed attention, for farming and ranching ideas believed viable in the late nineteenth century still affect the life of central Plains' residents today. A region subject to drought, both high and low temperatures, fierce winds, and exasperating grasshoppers, has witnessed settler retreats in the face of such devastating obstacles. But many stayed, some prospered, and numerous descendants, wealthy or not, still populate the central Plains.

The region today faces numerous problems, however, unforeseen by railroad companies concerned with profit and development in the late nineteenth century. Their promises of a garden too often proved false, for while the central Plains are considered to be part of the breadbasket of the world, drought, questionable water supplies, extreme weather, and low farm prices tend to produce something short of a happy garden of Eden. Large-scale areas of Plains acres put under the plow and worked over time and again has resulted in extensive environmental damage to a fragile ecosystem, as evidenced in western Kansas' 1930s Dust Bowl. Dan Flores, in *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains*, argues that "the Great Plains are ecologically a simple system," and a "region deceptively fragile." Such a vulnerable

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Office, *Report on Vital and Social Statistics for the Eleventh Census*, part I, vol. 20

system unfortunately suffers severely as “human interaction with the Plains centers around a series of ecological transformations that further simplify the system and lead to ecological crashes, several carrying profound consequences for the natural/human world.” These consequences involve a tremendous reduction of native plants and animals, including an 82-99 percent loss of tallgrass prairie on the eastern Plains, as well as the total elimination of Great Plains animals such as bighorn sheep and grizzly.<sup>2</sup>

The short-lived dominance of long-horned cattle barons in Kansas precipitated an environmental catastrophe that should have served as a cautionary tale for subsequent Plains’ residents dependent on agriculture. Donald Worster, in *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, points out that overstocking of cattle on the southern Plains, in some instances as much as four times what the available grass could accommodate in cattle, proved devastating when it combined with the severe winter of 1885-86. Some ranches lost as much as eighty-five percent of their herds. But such a lesson in environmental management went unheeded as farmers flocked in to claim primacy over the southern Plains, intending to forge an agricultural empire. “But as it turned out, the culture they had brought to the plains--the culture that had brought them there--was ecologically among the most unadaptive ever devised.” The ultimate culmination of such maladaptive practices incurred the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, one of the three greatest ecological disasters in history, according to George Borgstrom.<sup>3</sup>

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(Washington: Government Printing Office, [1896]): see map on p. 324.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001): 172-73; 176-77.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 83, 97, 4.



Today's Great Plains region as a whole suffers not just from environmental damage, but also from population depletion. Parts of the Plains saw a reduction of up to ten percent of their population beginning in the 1980s, and the century's end saw fifty-three out of Nebraska's ninety-three counties lose population, with the figure at fifty-seven out of 105 for Kansas. Each state registered twelve counties with a ten percent or more population loss, and both had one western county with a loss at or near seventeen percent.<sup>4</sup>

The current state of agriculture on the Great Plains shows a precarious existence for the small farmer. It also reveals the continued assistance of government farm aid. Nebraska and Kansas find themselves among those states reliant on government farm programs, with some of their farmers receiving over one hundred percent of their net farm income from the government under special crop programs. The top three states in which farmers earn rental money for keeping land out of crop production for ten years under the Conservation Reserve Program are the Great Plains states of Texas, North Dakota, and Kansas.<sup>5</sup> Obviously Thomas Jefferson's vision of independent yeoman farmers populating the United States has been blurred into a state of unreality

While Jefferson's dream failed to take hold, so did the railroads' promise that no unconquerable desert existed on the central Plains. Droughts plague Kansas and Nebraska, and the main underground source of irrigation water known as the Ogallala Aquifer continues on a precarious path of depletion. This aquifer, which covers most of Nebraska and roughly half of Kansas, also extends into other Great Plains areas of South

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<sup>4</sup> Flores, *Natural West*, 167; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (P.L. 94-171) Summary File and 1990 Census [www.census.gov].

Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. Excessive pumping of water out of the aquifer for irrigation purposes over a recent thirty year period has led to one conservative estimate placing the amount taken out of the aquifer as ten times the water replaced naturally.<sup>6</sup>

Inarguably, railroad companies contributed to the agricultural development of the central Plains, a development that led to the environmental devastation of its delicate ecosystem. While it must be acknowledged that many factors contributed to this situation, railroads nonetheless played a significant part. Their insistence that the central Plains was a garden could only serve as encouragement for many farmers and ranchers to misuse a great portion of the central Plains, a region that stubbornly continues to show a desert-like side to its personality long after any such characteristic was supposedly proven wrong.

The current depopulation of this area lying between the Missouri and the Rockies after more than a century of farming has led Frank and Deborah Popper to propose establishing a “buffalo commons” in parts of the Great Plains, including some areas in Kansas and Nebraska. Such a proposal has sparked much angry criticism from Plains’ residents and even denouncements by several Plains states governors.<sup>7</sup>

This controversy is directly linked to central Plains development of the late nineteenth century, a development vigorously encouraged by such entities as railroad companies who chose to ignore or refused to acknowledge the desert-like characteristics

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<sup>5</sup> Marvin Duncan, Dennis Fisher, and Mark Drabenstott, "America's Heartland: Can It Survive? (Economic Growth in the Rural Great Plains)" *USA Today* 125:2614 (July 1996), [<http://library.northernlight.com>]: 2.

<sup>6</sup> "The Ogallala Aquifer," Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc. (2000), [[www.kerrcenter.com](http://www.kerrcenter.com)]: see map in section 2.1-2.3 (no page numbers).

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Eckdish Knack, "The Poppers Strike a Nerve," *Planning* 56:5 (May 1990): 20-22.

of this vast territory. For the sake of profit, railroads misrepresented conditions on the central Plains to lure as many settlers as possible to this area that had been termed the “Great American Desert.” The social, economic, and environmental consequences of such an extensive advertising campaign, led by the railroads and various other agencies, still affect Plains dwellers today, for they have inherited a past that has led to an uncertain future.

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