

Review Essay Series

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AS KANSAS HISTORY

by Karl Brooks

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

One of the major goals of this review essay series is to give scholars the opportunity to explore new paths and imagine new vistas in Kansas history. We hope to recover more of our past and increase insight into it. Environmental history in Kansas presents us with unique opportunities to do both.

In this most recent installment, Professor Karl Brooks offers an evaluation of historical approaches to the meaning of environment in Kansas and ideas about new paths scholars might forge. Historians writing before 1980 took for granted the assumption that nature—the environment—was meant to be shaped to man's use. Seldom did they evaluate the negative impact of that use. Some nakedly argued that in the creation of America's industrial greatness the damage to the environment (as to humans) was worth the destruction. This concept fit well with the view that the expansion of the Americas was a great economic, social, and cultural triumph.

The new environmental history, according to Professor Brooks, instead examines how "humans strive to control nature" and how it resists, adapts, and persists. The new history looks out at how man has changed the environment and how nature "requires people to reshape their cultures, economies,

Congress created Kansas Territory in 1854 by inscribing fictional lines across the grasslands. Nature, that ever-present agent of change, paid the politicians no mind. Wind, weather, soil, and water—the whole suite of nonhuman phenomena—continued shaping Great Plains human history. Culture, in varieties nearly infinite, still enabled humans to cope with natural forces and features. People living in what was now officially Kansas still had to solve the basic ecological problem of enduring on the grasslands. The endless conversation—culture that expressed humans' distinctive status inflecting nature that owed nothing to humans—continued after 1854. This perpetual dialogue still transforms the land that gave life to its human occupants.

Environmental history opens new perspectives about how nature and human culture, operating in tandem, have perpetually re-made Kansas, this imagined rectangle amid a real place. Since 1980 historians have better understood nature's sovereign contributions to creating Kansas. "The subtlety and serenity of the grasslands define their character," according to Daniel Licht, "but those same traits engender a lack of focus compared with the jagged peaks and cascading waters" farther west.¹ Environmental history clarifies what was once murky by spotlighting nature's interplay with culture. It offers deeper understanding of change on the Central Plains after 1700, when constant contact replaced chance encounters between native peoples and newcomers from Europe.

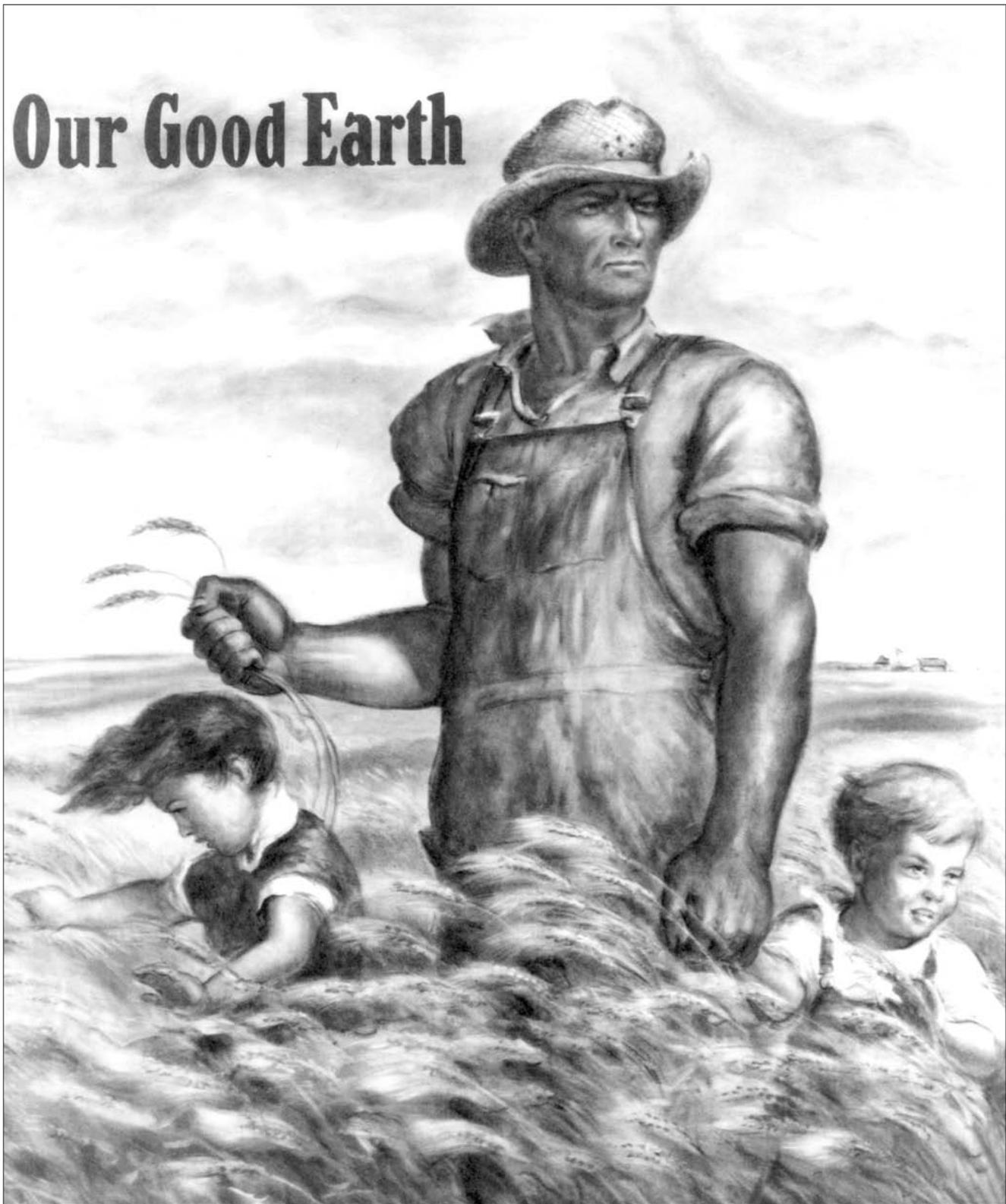
Louis Warren's 2003 *American Environmental History* asks, "What is environmental history?" It is, he replied, studying "how people have lived in the natural systems of the planet, and how they have perceived nature and reshaped it to suit their own idea of good living." Its methods "encompass the investigation of how nature, once changed, requires people to reshape their cultures, economies, and politics to meet new realities." History, although primarily a humanistic discipline, thus yields new understanding of scientific topics because "environmental

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1. Daniel S. Licht, *Ecology and Economics of the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 29 (Summer 2006): 2.

Our Good Earth



Environmental history opens new perspectives about how nature and human culture, operating in tandem, have perpetually re-made Kansas.

and politics to meet new realities." As we face the enduring problem of aridity, and depleted resources and sustainability, this can be a usable past indeed—it offers new ways to think about the past and about nature, and it demonstrates the necessity to reexamine ourselves.

This new approach to history urges us to look at how people have dealt with both challenges and opportunities in nature and helps provide a more balanced assessment of the costs and benefits of their behavior. Another major contribution is the development of methodologies that incorporate work of scientists into the array of methods historians ordinarily wield.

Long before the new history, historians examined a wide range of important topics in Kansas history. Fur trapping and trading, scarcity of wood on the prairies, cattle ranching, wheat farming, and recurrent drought, to name a few. Newer studies include those topics, but expand the field by looking at Native Americans and their impact on the environment, new organisms introduced by transplanted cultures, the importance of wild animals, the connection of Kansas with global capitalism and national markets, industrialization and urban growth, and the contested ideology of progress and development.

As Professor Brooks points out, the bookshelves are now packed with "twenty-five years of environmental history-writing." It is now a good time to assess that work and utilize it in our quest to reinterpret and better understand nature and culture in Kansas history. We need to fill in gaps in coverage revealed by new studies, establish new periodization, recognize overlooked causes of change in our past, and, in particular, record how nature's "action" has been a crucial force in history.

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histories are not just new ways of thinking about history, but new ways of thinking about nature, too."²

Environmental history's contribution to Kansas history starts, naturally enough, at this spot on earth. The Sunflower State occupies a space both unique and commonplace. Ecosystems composed of land, water, and living organisms occur nowhere else in precisely the same array.³ Kansas, one of many mostly rectangular pieces governments have laid atop the Great Plains, also shares natural forces and features in common with millions of other square miles across the midsection of North America.⁴ Environmental history's first great premise, therefore, contends that the place called "Kansas" reflects immeasurably long influences, applied with no human direction whatsoever, by the most basic forces of life on earth. Science, rather than history, documents and explains the workings of these forces. Environmental history thus borrows from work by the whole array of life scientists: biologists, ecologists, botanists, any kind of "-ologist" who seeks to understand, through experiment and observation, the forces that move creation.⁵

Succeeding waves of humans have inhabited this particular patch of earth for at least the past fifteen thousand years.⁶ Each group, no matter its tools or cultural traits, has had to connect with and depend on this place to survive. Links between people and place have unfolded and multiplied in response to the landscape they have changed.⁷ Environmental history thus provides Kansas history its second central premise: Nature, in this location over recorded time, has presented groups of humans certain challenges and opportunities. People, like every other living organism, have had to solve natural constraints to survive in numbers.⁸

Environmental history during the previous quarter-century has established the centrality of natural forces, working in actual places, to studies of human change. A history of, for example, hydrocarbon production in twentieth-century Kansas works best by first establishing the geological and geographic foundations that underlay the technological and economic story.⁹ Environmental history has also demonstrated nonhuman nature's power of sovereignty, its capacity to act on

2. Louis Warren, ed., *American Environmental History* (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 1–2.

3. Compare older and newer descriptions of Kansas, as a place in nature, in Kenneth Davis, *Kansas: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), and John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land*, 2d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

4. For an exploration of commonalities and distinctions across the Plains and Kansas, see Licht, *Ecology and Economics of the Great Plains*; Dan L. Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

5. Daniel Botkin, *Our Natural History: The Lessons of Lewis and Clark* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1995); Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983–).

6. For a collection of many of the best scholarly works about Kansas Indians, see Donald Fixico, "American Indians in Kansas: Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 26 (Winter 2003–2004): 272–87; James N. Leiker, "Race Relations in the Sunflower State: Review Essay," *ibid.* 25 (Autumn 2002): 214–36, n. 35. See also Joseph B. Herring, *The Enduring Indians of Kansas: A Century and a Half of Acculturation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990).

7. Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), offers an early but methodologically still influential study of the adaptation problem.

8. Controversial essays by planning scholars Frank J. and Deborah E. Popper in the late 1980s starkly questioned the sustainability of postwar adaptive technologies, pivoting on groundwater irrigation, for the Great Plains. See "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust: What Can be Done After the Next Disaster Strikes," *Planning* 53 (December 1987): 12–18; "The Fate of the Plains," *High Country News* 20 (1988): 15–19.

9. John Garretson Clark, *Towns and Minerals in Southeastern Kansas: A Study in Regional Industrialization, 1890–1930* (Lawrence: State Geological Survey of Kansas, 1970), deserves revision and ultimately replacement.

people rather than to exist simply as inert matter. Historians of the Central Plains no longer simply assume the existence of the grasslands, a blank canvas mutely awaiting its fate as human designs unfold.¹⁰

The Central Plains have long compelled a due regard for nature. Historians considering this vast grassland, spanning four hundred thousand square miles of the Platte and Arkansas River basins between the Rocky Mountains and Missouri River, have acknowledged natural features' and forces' influences on human agency.¹¹ Even before environmental history emerged as a distinctive field after 1980, western historians invested classic Kansas topics—fur trapping, cattle ranching, and wheat farming—with an appreciation for the human use of nature.¹² Older studies of nature–culture exchanges often suggested what environmental historians now deem the central question about interpreting the past: how have natural forces and features interacted with human ideas and choices? Borrowing and extending western history's earlier insights, environmental history scrutinizes these constant collisions to understand how they changed both the world we did not make and the thick web of culture we fashion by living forward through time.¹³



Historians of the Central Plains no longer simply assume the existence of the grasslands, a blank canvas mutely awaiting its fate as human designs unfold. Rather, they acknowledge natural features' and forces' influences on human agency. The above photo depicts the vast and open expanse of the Flint Hills.

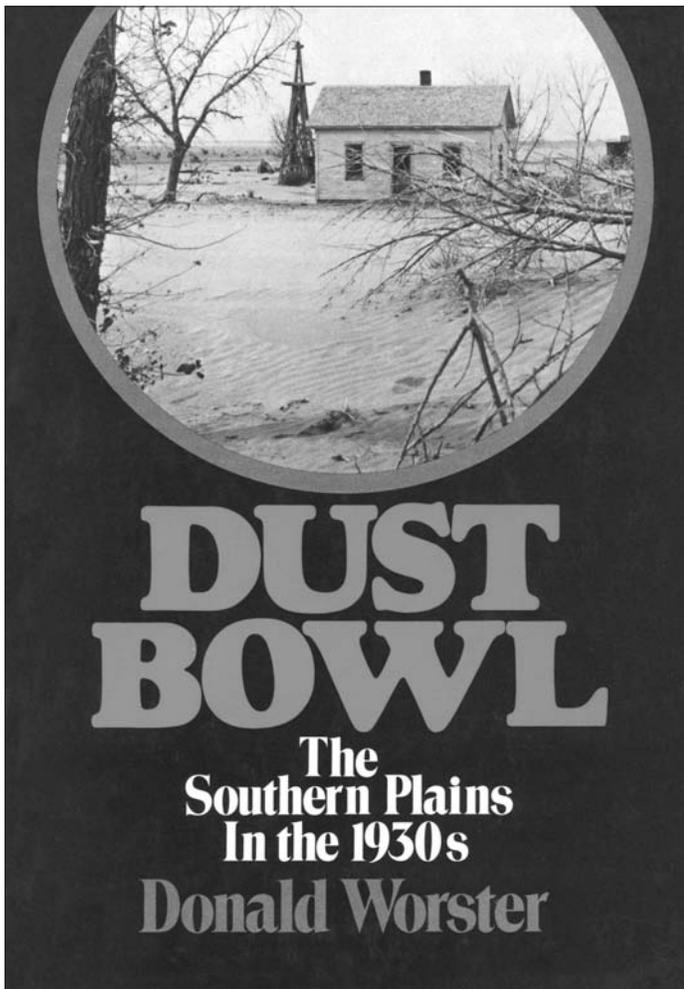
Now that twenty-five years of environmental history-writing packs the shelves, this essay reviews some of the field's most significant recent works dealing with Kansas. Of course, environmental historians encircle the globe, with new books appearing in 2005 about Africa, Asia, and even Antarc-

10. Contrast Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 2005), and Terry G. Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusions, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), with Robert Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns: A Social History of the Kansas Cattle Trading Centers Abilene, Ellsworth, Wichita, Dodge City and Caldwell, 1867 to 1885* (New York: Knopf, 1968).

11. Licht, *Ecology and Economics of the Great Plains*, offers a good geographic and ecological overview.

12. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), focuses on Canada but her bibliography lists many standard histories of the Plains fur industry. For a standard ranching and farming history, see George E. Ham and Robin Higham, eds., *The Rise of the Wheat State: A History of Kansas Agriculture, 1861–1986* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1987). For an introduction of the “new” western history that emerged in the 1970s, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987); William Cronon et al., eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

13. Donald Worster, “Water as a Tool of Empire,” in *An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 31–53, investigates a typical western history topic with the new environmental–historical approach to culture and nature. James E. Sherow, “The Art of Water and the Art of Living: Review Essay,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Spring 2002): 52–71, assesses environmental history's fertilization of western water history.



Donald Worster's 1979 work *Dust Bowl* contends that Americans suffered severe setbacks on the Plains in the 1930s because they misunderstood the place they inhabited. They heedlessly imported a culture that failed to adapt to the distinctive natural forces that had shaped the Plains for ten millennia.

tica.¹⁴ Yet Donald Worster's seminal 1979 book, *Dust Bowl*, makes Kansas a prime venue for hosting environmental history's unofficial "silver anniversary." Kansas posed the questions and Kansans generated the evidence that a son of Kansas parents used to pioneer the field of environmental history.¹⁵

Worster acknowledged the earlier work of Plains scholars interested in environment and history, principally James Malin and Walter Prescott Webb. As Robert Swierenga noted in 1984, "Ecology is history writ large in James C. Malin's thought."¹⁶ Yet *Dust Bowl* deserves its iconic reputation. It applied several new methodologies at once, stylishly and compellingly. Worster analyzed the interlocking problems of drought, soil erosion, and rural distress not only as events unique to the 1930s but as perennial historical questions, bitingly relevant to the Plains but present across recorded time and space.¹⁷ Traditional subjects, such as Indian-white relations, and newer problems, such as industrial agriculture, all figured into his assessment of why the Dust Bowl happened when and how it did. Worster solved old problems in a new way by showing how nonhuman actors exercised historical power to shape human responses. *Dust Bowl* does nothing less than invert the customary cause-and-effect equation that had long structured Kansas history-writing.¹⁸

At its most provocative level, *Dust Bowl* contends that Americans suffered severe setbacks on the Plains in the 1930s because they misunderstood the place they inhabited. They heedlessly imported a culture, expressed by mechanized agriculture and global capitalism, that failed to adapt to the distinctive natural forces that had shaped the Plains for ten millennia. Worster portrayed rural economic collapse as the result not only of time-specific natural conditions, but as the

14. James C. McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500–2000* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Brett L. Walker, *The Lost Wolves of Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005); Frank Oldfield, *Environmental Change: Key Issues and Alternative Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

15. Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Oxford University Press published a second edition in 2004, which differed from the first only in Worster's new "Afterword" that briefly assessed his original book's effects and reception. Worster was born in California but considers himself a Kansan.

16. Robert P. Swierenga, "Ecological Theory and the Grassland," in *History & Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), xiii; Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 204–9.

17. Compare R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), with Cunfer, *On the Great Plains*, and Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), to see how environmental history has reshaped historians' principal questions about a basic human activity.

18. R. Douglas Hurt, "Agricultural and Rural History of Kansas: Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 27 (Autumn 2004): 194–217, begins correcting earlier interpretations that stressed both the "unprecedented" nature of the 1930s drought and Kansans' adaptability.

consequence of cultural choices made far earlier than 1935 and in places far distant from the Arkansas River basin.¹⁹

Environmental history's new methods are less novel than its bold objectives. *Dust Bowl* implores historians to both broaden their gaze and sharpen their judgments. Worster's moral, some said "moralistic," conclusions about plainsmen paved the way for environmental histories of many societies. The field encourages historians to assess not only how humans adapted to distinctive places, but equally important, how their cultural assumptions and expressions have made that adaptive process work relatively well or poorly. *Dust Bowl* signaled the advent of a more frankly prescriptive history about humans living in a world they did not entirely make.²⁰

As much as any environmental historian, Dan Flores has inquired about Plains history's role in fledging this now-mature field. His 2001 essay collection *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* contends that "the original source for environmental history" lay in efforts to understand human occupancy of this "uncommon country."²¹ Historians working on questions posed by Plains habitation since 1700 learned to take "the deep view," digging below standard "events," such as wars and elections, to ponder "our interaction with the ecological landscape, with what we might call the 'natural world,' as both an idea in the mind and as tangible rock, grass, and flesh, which of course it is."²²

Flores and historian Louis Warren, sizing up environmental history's first-generation legacy, agreed that several key questions engage its practitioners. Nearly all combine a sense of wonder at the power of natural forces with regret over the consequences of human actions. Each defends a method of doing history that, at its best, informs moral judgments about choices made and opportunities forfeited. For Warren, the collision between global capitalism and indigenous lifeways marked a central theme because its aftermath unleashed new organisms and cultural forms that profoundly transformed people and places.²³ Flores concurred, claiming that "modern industrial capitalism's assault on nature" supplied the interpretive frame for environmental history of the Plains. "The purpose of history," he wrote, "is not just celebration, but to ground us in place and give us some perspective and context and some powers of discernment."²⁴

With discernment sharpened, judgment comes naturally to environmental historians of Kansas and the Plains. Like Flores, historian Rita Napier has linked environmental history's birth to the older history of the American West. She believes its robust adolescence helped energize the "new Western history" that

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19. Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 2d ed., 244–52, explains the author's purpose, which later works, especially his biography of John Wesley Powell, develop more fully. See Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

20. William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton: 1995), collects some provocative explorations of culture's impact on nature. A decade after *Dust Bowl*, "Environmental History: A Round Table," *Journal of American History* 76 (1990): 1087–1147, debated the propriety of historical judging.

21. Dan L. Flores, *Natural West*, 7, 165.

22. *Ibid.*, 4.

23. Warren, *American Environmental History*, 2–3.

24. Flores, *Natural West*, 167, 172.



Many “traditional topics,” such as cattle ranching, important to Kansas history are subjects also central to environmental histories. This very typical Kansas grasslands image (above) was taken in the Flint Hills.

began to emerge in the 1970s. Napier thought Flores’s assertion that “the Great Plains are . . . part of the American West” was well grounded in both ecology and geography.²⁵ Her 2003 *Kansas and the West: New Perspectives* offers key essays between 1975 and 2000 that often consciously integrate environmental history into the new western history. Chief among the “new issues” that Napier thought recast the “traditional subjects” of interest to Kansas history—cattle ranching, agriculture, armed warfare with Indians—are topics central to environmental histories: global capitalism and national markets, industrialization and city growth, and the contested ideology of “progress and development.”²⁶

Americans pioneered environmental history, but the movement has inspired others to reconsider how the North American grasslands’ sweep and complexity have influenced western history. Canadian Clinton L. Evans found that Euro-American farmers coming onto the Prairie Provinces in the mid-nineteenth century shared with their American neighbors “a common relationship [that] evolved roughly simultaneously in Western Canada and the northern United States in response to similar environmental and social conditions.”²⁷ His 2002 *The War on Weeds in the Prairie West* stresses that people, weeds’ adversaries (and unwitting allies), carried their plant communities from northwest Europe along both sides of the international border. Distinctive national narratives proved less helpful than “locating human history within the larger realm of nature by studying the interactions between people and environment over time.”²⁸ Tracing the course of prairie Canadians’ intimate embrace with unwanted plants, Evans asked questions originally formulated by historians of the American Great Plains: how did humans strive to control nature and how did it resist, adapt, and persist? After all, he concluded, “nature and culture are not separate entities. They are, rather, simply different aspects of a larger phenomenon.”²⁹

South of the border, settlement of the upper Missouri River basin’s arid High Plains encountered natural constraints as well. While railroads were linking

25. Flores, *ibid.*, 167; Rita Napier, ed., “Rethinking the Past, Reimagining the Future,” in *Kansas and the West: New Perspectives* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 1–40. Napier’s introduction first appeared as the Autumn 2001 introductory essay to *Kansas History*’s ongoing “Review Essay Series.”

26. Napier, *Kansas and the West*, 12–14.

27. Clinton L. Evans, *The War on Weeds in the Prairie West: An Environmental History* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002), 117–18.

28. *Ibid.*, xiii.

29. *Ibid.*, xiv.

Kansas farms to national grain markets after 1880, James J. Hill's Great Northern Railway pushed its "high line" from St. Paul to Seattle. Claire Strom's 2003 *Profiting from the Plains: The Great Northern Railway* considers natural agency a crucial factor in deciding why Hill and his corporation succeeded in the short-term but ultimately failed to inaugurate a new phase of Jefferson's "yeoman dream" in this cold, dry land. "The environment was pivotal to agricultural success, just as it was to most early Western economic development," she concluded.³⁰ Bold as were Hill's dreams and ruthless his management tactics, "finally, the environment played a crucial, and largely unacknowledged, role in all the agricultural schemes. All the optimism and greed of the human participants ultimately depended on the environmental feasibility of their projects."³¹

History-writing often has slapped general labels on the American grasslands, but recent environmental histories have stressed the Plains' ecological complexity and human diversity. Historical geographer Richard V. Francaviglia tied the natural history of north Texas and central Oklahoma to southeastern Kansas using not grass but trees. His 2000 *Cast Iron Forest* explores the Cross Timbers, two thick belts of oaks originally running north from what has become the Dallas–Ft. Worth metroplex into the southern flanks of the Kansas Flint Hills.³² Western outlier of the great eastern woodlands, the Cross Timbers' oak woods and sandstone ridges shaped three hundred years of Euro-American occupancy. First a barrier to north-moving Mexicans, it then frustrated French and English people exploring up the Red and Arkansas River basins. As late as the 1880s Cross Timbers people still subsisted as frontier farmers, hunters, and loggers in "Texas Appalachia." Brief coal-mining and brick-making booms stimulated a briefer oil craze that had subsided by 1930 leaving rural parts of the Cross Timbers as poor and thinly settled in 1940 as they had been a generation after the Civil War. Francaviglia considered the vast expansion of urban Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Dallas–Ft. Worth an ironical boon to the remnant forests. What once resisted the plow and deterred the railroad now graces suburban development, enhancing home values as it conserves wildlife habitat, the value of which "cannot be overestimated."³³

Environmental history suggests the need to reconsider several major questions about how the American past became our Kansas present. Properly answering those questions requires reconfiguring the periods that historians usually have used to organize the Kansas past. And new periods suggested by environmental history reveal persistent gaps in current accounts of this place we inhabit on the Central Plains. Reading nature into the human story reveals how some traditional period-markers have missed or at least blurred the underlying causes of change. Moving the markers that organize evidence challenges some important, long-accepted cause-and-effect relationships.

In place of many neat chapters typically divided by political events, the making of Kansas reflects longer, more subtle phases. They usually align with changes

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30. Claire Strom, *Profiting from the Plains: The Great Northern Railway and Corporate Development of the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 8.

31. *Ibid.*, 11.

32. Richard V. Francaviglia, *The Cast Iron Forest: A Natural and Cultural History of the North American Cross Timbers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 2–3.

33. *Ibid.*, 22–24, 148–67, 169–74, 198.



Kansas began to take shape amid multiplying contacts between Indians and Europeans, each striving to make the Plains home. Native Americans' "great leap forward" came on horseback, spurring major relocations of tribal groups and deep readjustments in work patterns and family life.

incited by nature's own imperatives: weather and climate, vegetation and soil chemistry, water and wind. Agency exerted by nature's features and forces has prompted human adaptations, which typically come only after sharp, brief spasms of conflict and discord. Some major Kansas crises customarily attributed to purely human agency instead signify people's divergent responses to changes occurring beneath their feet and above their heads.³⁴

At the outset of the twenty-first century, census data document a historic migration, another human hegira, from the Central Plains. Kansans, again on the move to cope with environmental change, have unleashed cultural upheavals with consequences still unfinished in 2006.³⁵ Conditions are thus ripe

for reassessing Kansas's place in one of American history's most basic problems: how humans of European ancestry dispossessed the Plains from those of Asian ancestry denominated "Indian peoples." That contested succession triggered environmental shifts that have constantly reshaped Euro-American occupation of the Plains. With nature now assigned its rightful place in the human narrative, Kansas historians have begun to look anew at how humans, trying to make this place home, have dealt with one another. Since 1700 people have come together on the Central Plains in an array of social forms testing the range and amplitude of the historian's best kaleidoscope. Call those linkages more generally "culture," or more specifically "politics," "gender," "technology," or "economics," they nonetheless make the stuff of human, as opposed to natural, history.³⁶

Kansas began to take shape amid multiplying contacts between Indians and Europeans, each striving to make the Plains home. During this first phase of Kansas history, both groups encountered a new place on the Plains. Indian peoples' adaptation was still under way when Europeans began staying in substantial numbers after 1700. Europeans entered a fluid world, one where people and nature were in flux. Indians had only just begun to borrow and adapt the horse to grasslands life. Their "great leap forward" came on horseback, spurring major re-

34. John Opie, *Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998), and Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), boldly attempt to recast American history along environmental lines.

35. "State's Rural Population Continues to Shrink," *Lawrence Journal-World*, December 13, 2005; "Population Changing in Kansas Counties," *ibid.*, April 14, 2005.

36. Cronon, "Introduction: In Search of Nature," 23–68, in *Uncommon Ground*, provides a thoughtful starting place for thinking about how the "cultural" turn in environmental history since the mid-1990s has complicated neat distinctions between natural and constructed.

locations of tribal groups and deep readjustments in work patterns and family life. Mounted hunters, especially the Comanches and Cheyennes, were claiming new buffalo grounds from more established and sedentary peoples, such as the Osages and Apaches.³⁷

Both Indians and Europeans encountered the same natural opportunities presented by broad grasslands awash with big quadrupeds. Both shared the Plains with animals, a category that environmental historians have expanded beyond the majestic bison and elks to include beavers, fish, birds, and even pathogens, bacteria, and insects.³⁸ Environmental historians' new interest in micro-organisms has helped unlock a mystery at the heart of the first phase of Kansas history: why Indian societies often crumbled when pressed by American power after 1800. Diseases borne by the first Spanish and French traders and explorers disordered native societies. While debates still rage about the precise mortality rates, few dispute the profound effect of diseases and other parts of what Alfred Crosby has termed the European "biological portmanteau."³⁹

Thus environmental history helps link the first phase of Kansas history, characterized by Indian–white encounters on the Central Plains, to imperial adjustments under way throughout North America after 1700. Spanish and French explorers, pursuing imperial designs sketched on rudimentary maps in Madrid and Paris, collided with other empire builders pursuing their own plans devised during decades in council lodges along the Platte and Arkansas Rivers. The Central Plains resembled an imperial chessboard, the various contestants using technologies premised on ideas they adapted to meet distinctive natural realities.

Once Americans replaced English people in the "great game" after securing independence in the 1780s, Kansas history passed beyond its first phase. A new central thesis—imperial expansion and contraction under influences brought to and modified by the Plains environment—frames the second major phase of Kansas history. This second phase asks how Americans penetrated and overspread the Plains. Intending to subdue the land, oust its indigenous human occupants, and re-make a facsimile of the new nation, Americans strove to reproduce a new yeomen's commonwealth on the Central Plains. Their superficial triumphs during the nineteenth century largely foundered on old environmental realities: climate, vegetation, and geography. Powerful enough to reorder land occupancy and to bind the Plains politically to the United States, American values prevented immigrants coming to Kansas in the nineteenth century from successfully adapting to the grasslands over the long term. Their imported culture of individualistic capitalism meshed poorly with the environmental challenges on the ground.⁴⁰

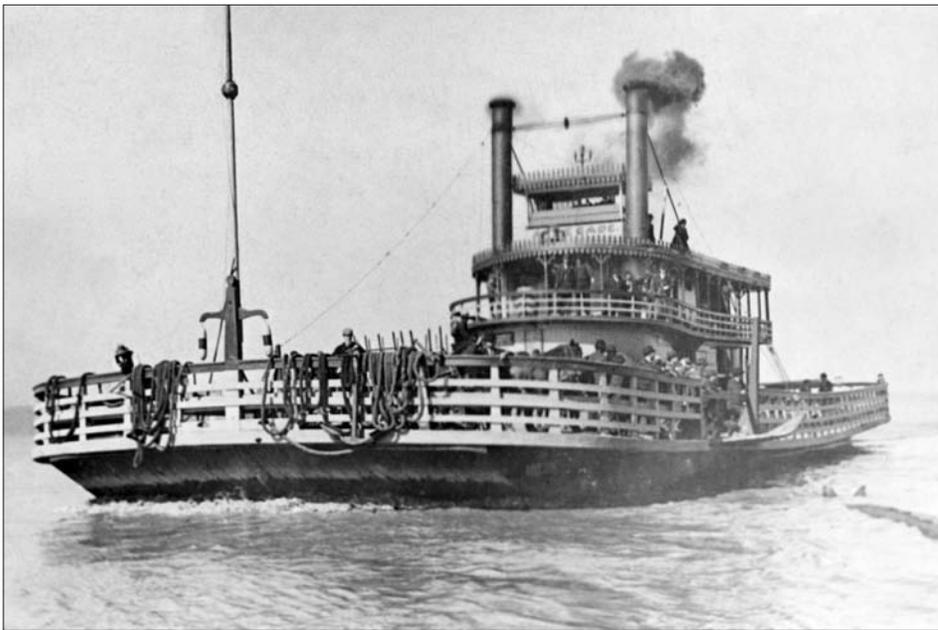
37. Flores, "Bison Diplomacy Redux," in *American Environmental History*, ed. Warren, 161–75.

38. Paul A. Johnsgard, *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Andrew C. Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Eugene D. Fleharty, *Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

39. Donald Worster, "Other People, Other Lives," in *An Unsettled Country*, 55–90, applies to the west pioneering work on nonhuman organisms, including diseases, by Alfred W. Crosby in, among other books, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

40. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Flores, "Bison Diplomacy Redux."

Americans' superficial triumphs on the Plains during the nineteenth century largely foundered on old environmental realities: climate, vegetation, and geography.



Technology and powered transportation incorporated the Plains into urban capitalist networks. Steamboats, for example, were essential in the development of fur trading and crop growing, and they carried human cargo (Indians from the East, African Americans slaves, and free white farmers) who played important roles in revolutionizing the Plains. Pictured above is the Annie Cade steamer on the Missouri River.

In Kansas history's second great phase, from roughly 1801 through the early 1900s, trails running west became rails crisscrossing Kansas. Technology as much as ideology tied the Plains into the American experiment. For the first time large numbers of people moving from the East encountered the unique natural challenges and opportunities across the wide Missouri. An early period of exploration and assessment ended about 1850 as the United States took control of its war-won Mexican lands. The state's hand was far from invisible. Government-directed surveys reconnoitered new lands acquired by purchase and conquest. Federal policy assumed the virtue, and encouraged the mission, of capitalizing nature. Various state subsidies introduced new forms of power—especially steam and electricity—that accelerated the movement of people, products, and information. A later period of the second phase opened as American farmers charged onto the Plains after the

Civil War. They bore technological adaptations—railroads, telegraphs, farm machinery—that bound Kansas nature to American culture using property and markets.⁴¹

Environmental history encourages a closer look at the means used to incorporate the Plains into American and global markets during this second great phase of Kansas history. In the grasslands known as Kansas after 1854, permanent American settlements at the eastern edge of the Plains unleashed a new element of change: the urbanizing impulse. New proto-cities—first St. Louis, followed by upriver satellites Kansas City, St. Joseph–Leavenworth, and Council Bluffs–Omaha—centralized the facilities needed to more fully exploit Plains products for national and global markets. Urban life concentrated world capitalism into powerful currents that continually played across what was becoming recognizably Kansas.⁴²

41. Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), incorporates much of the recent reconsideration of exploration under federal direction. Sterling Evans, "From Kanasin to Kansas: Mexican Sisal, Binder Twine, and the State Penitentiary Twine Factory, 1890–1940," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Winter 2001–2002): 276–99, ties together characteristic strands of capitalism's incorporation of Kansas labor and nature into world markets.

42. William S. Worley, "Urban History of Kansas: Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Winter 2005–2006): 274–89, helpfully collects and analyzes both older and newer works considering cities.

Furs from the river basins laddering the Plains streamed into St. Louis as New York, Boston, and London investors enabled trappers to serve customers around the globe. Americans forged trade links to Santa Fe, the principal administrative and commercial center serving the former Mexican provinces. After the 1830s agricultural investors in New Orleans, Memphis, and Natchez underwrote slave-based commodity agriculture's expansion to the more humid edges of the Great Plains: Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. By the late 1840s, as shifting consumer preferences were about to doom fur markets, goods, people, and ideas had carved deep channels onto the grasslands. Capital and technology—American culture's distinctive economic expressions—flowed in both directions across the Central Plains. New cities at the receiving end of trade channels housed the investors and brokers who redirected profits down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and up the Ohio into the United States heartland.⁴³

Dramatic capitalist transformation of the Plains during the nineteenth century encourages environmental historians to shed light on how changing power technology drove shifting transportation modes.⁴⁴ Steamboats became essential to both fur trading and crop growing. They also carried unwilling human cargoes—Indians from the East forcibly removed to the Plains and African American slaves tasked to open farms up the Missouri and Red Rivers—as well as eager California gold seekers and free white farmers jumping off at Independence and St. Joseph. Claire Strom's study of the Great Northern Railroad on the Northern Plains indicates how transportation histories of the rail revolution in Kansas can be written with nature in mind. William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* and Andrew Hurley's *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis* should inspire other studies of fuel, technology, and powered transportation used to incorporate the Plains into urban capitalist networks.⁴⁵

Kansans had good reason to celebrate their state's twentieth birthday less than two decades after the end of the Civil War. The state's white population had multiplied nearly tenfold since statehood. Small farmers and larger cattle ranchers shipping to national markets both seemed lucky beneficiaries of federal policy to plant capitalism on the Plains. But beginning in the mid-1880s Kansans came painfully to realize their cultural tools had reordered the Plains environment on unstable ground. Climate confounded the dreamers. Strings of drought and blizzards, inevitable if not entirely predictable, marked out powerful environmental limits to individualistic capitalism. Americans' cultural adaptations to the grasslands proved poorly suited to long-term persistence. Disregarded warnings about aridity and pleas for pastoralism and community governance, preached by visionaries such as John Wesley Powell, proved prescient. Farmers who believed rain would follow the plow, railroad, and telegraph line instead retreated from the High Plains of western and central Kansas.⁴⁶

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43. Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City: Kansas City Star Books, 1999), ch. 1–3, reflect this new attention to urbanized capitalism.

44. Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), illustrates one method of using power to write history.

45. Strom, *Profiting from the Plains*; H. Roger Grant, "Kansas Transportation: Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 26 (Autumn 2003): 206–29; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); Andrew Hurley, ed., *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997).

46. Worster, "The Legacy of John Wesley Powell," in *An Unsettled Country*, 1–30.

The state's tentative effort to protect lands of high ecological value might or might not signal a deeper shift in human values.

Populism, a subject exhaustively treated by Kansas historians for nearly a century, accompanied the harsh environmental and economic transition that spanned the end of the nineteenth and dawn of the twentieth century. Environmental histories inform Populist histories by broadening their scope to consider more linkages between natural and political cycles of boom, disappointment, and recovery. Reappearance of good times in the first decade of the twentieth century suggests mechanized farming, funded by producers eager to sell to growing urban populations nationwide and worldwide, overcame, at least temporarily, political turbulence caused by capitalism's ignorance of aridity.⁴⁷

Populism's eclipse in the first decade of the twentieth century, like the passing of a spring storm cell, seems to drain electricity from Kansas histories of that century. Napier's *Kansas and the West* indicates how much remains to be done in our own times. Historiographical discontinuity—between Populist fervor and twentieth-century placidity—suggests more than the possibility that Kansas history entered a third great phase after roughly 1910. Environmental history offers significant new re-readings that link Kansas's first century of white occupation to trends and development that shaped the twentieth century. In particular, the two decades preceding the rural economic collapse that gripped the nation in the mid-1920s deserve scrutiny. Plains cities boomed: Kansas City, Tulsa, Denver, and Omaha became major centers of industry, financial services, and ethnic diversity. In the countryside, mass-produced internal-combustion farm equipment, advertised and delivered by national manufacturers, ensnared producers in the "high energy society." Land-grant colleges, celebrating their first half-century, became central means for "modernizing" agriculture by promoting commodity production and massive investments of technology.⁴⁸

The end of the Dirty Thirties marked a major shift in Plains agriculture. The national state became, for many producers and customers, laboratory, lender, and marketer of first and last resort. Worster's *Dust Bowl* certainly has not exhausted this rich, controversial topic. Douglas Hurt's account of the 1930s credits federal expertise with encouraging Plains farmers to adapt to environmental variability. Geographers Frank J. and Deborah E. Popper, who raised the "buffalo commons" concept, and historian Geoff Cunfer are less convinced. Tight focus on the Dust Bowl years should encourage equally stimulating inquiries into the next seventy-five years. We need better understanding of the links and discontinuities between New Deal farm policy and agribusiness's embrace of permanent federal crop price supports. Postwar grain surpluses, watered by irrigation subsidies, may or may not have contributed to recent rural depopulation. The state's tentative effort to protect lands of high ecological value might or might not signal a deeper shift in human values. In any event, neither feature of rural life has yet been set satisfactorily into a re-conceptualized modern Kansas history.⁴⁹

47. Hurt, "Agricultural History of Kansas," hints at new approaches that link Populism to environmental crises triggered by mechanized agriculture's onset at a time of climatic change.

48. Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory*, touches on these developments in the prairie Midwest.

49. David E. Kromm and Stephen E. White, eds., *Groundwater Exploitation in the High Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), and James Earl Sherow, *Watering the Valley: Development Along the High Plains Arkansas River, 1870–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), indicate some directions forward in the interlocked history of federal policy, state water law, and postwar agricultural expansion. Douglas S. Harvey, "Creating a 'Sea of Galilee': The Rescue of Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, 1927–1930," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* (Spring 2001): 2–17, indicates how land-protection histories might be developed.

As modern environmental history began with Worster's hard look at Dust Bowl despair, so the field's new works might profitably interrogate the postwar era's blue suburban skies and bustling urban areas. In Kansas, as elsewhere in the nation and on the Plains, shopping centers and subdivisions quickly replaced dust clouds and abandoned farmsteads. So far, no useful account traces World War II's multiple impacts on the Central Plains.⁵⁰ Global conflict built Wichita into America's air capital, restored prosperity to farms and ranches, and placed Kansas City at the node of the nation's rail network. Rural events dominate, properly, Kansas histories of the 1900–1940 period. But wartime prosperity, and especially postwar boom times, pushed Kansans onto a road that led, generally, into town.⁵¹

Environmental change has always stimulated deep shifts among the Plains' human inhabitants. The "westward ho" narrative served its purpose before the twentieth century, but more recent histories have begun recovering the stories of more than just Anglo American migrants. Meat-packing and railroading, and then coal mining and oil production, turned both Plains cities and their dependent hinterlands into complex ethnic communities, often riven with religious, cultural, and linguistic clashes. We know much about the migration of Mexican people along the route of the Santa Fe railroad after 1915, but we know less about the complex series of environmental, agricultural, and technological changes that made people of Mexican ancestry the predominant labor force in Kansas's giant packing plants and feedlots after 1970.⁵²

Federal policy, long dedicated to turning the land into a factory, began focusing after 1950 on making water the servant of capital. In a quarter-century following the Kansas River floods of 1951, huge federal reservoirs were built on all

50. Western history's natal influence on environmental history suggests the growing body of World War II studies of the far West will inspire closer studies of the Plains. Gerald Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985), and Nash, *World War II and the West: Reshaping the Economy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), have influenced Richard Macais, "'We All Had a Cause': Kansas City's Bomber Plant, 1940–1945," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Winter 2005): 244–61.

51. Craig Miner, *Wichita: The Magic City* (Wichita, Kans.: Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum Assn., 1988).

52. Valerie Mendoza, "They Came to Kansas," *Kansas Quarterly* 25 (no. 2, 1994): 97–106; Donald D. Stull, Michael J. Broadway, and David Craig Griffith, eds., *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).



Federal policy, long dedicated to turning the land into a factory, began focusing after 1950 on making water the servant of capital. In a quarter century following the Kansas River floods of 1951, huge federal reservoirs were built on all of its principal tributaries. Pictured above is Tuttle Creek Dam and Reservoir and (inset) a ceremonial scene at its dedication in 1963.



The farmer and agriculture have long held central roles in the ongoing interplay between culture and nature. But today, because Kansans are largely part of an urbanized society, new questions are raised about the relationship between Plains people and the environment. The above photograph was taken shortly after the turn of the twentieth century in Sedgwick County.

of its principal tributaries. We know a fair bit about the transformation of the main-stem Missouri under the Pick-Sloan strategy. We know far less about how Plains people demanded, received, and embraced reservoirs on the Missouri's tributaries throughout eastern and central Kansas.⁵³

In less than two decades after 1945, plainsmen Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower served sixteen straight years as U.S. presidents. How each responded to regional clamor by spreading federal largesse across Kansas is still mostly a history to be written. Kansas City, a place both knew intimately, offers a case study of Plains urbanization, as well as a problem in transportation, land use, and suburbanization that promises national implications. By many measurements the most suburbanized, freeway-dependent major city in America, Kansas City occupies the epicenter of social, cultural, and demographic upheavals that made

Americans into a suburban people between 1950 and 1980.⁵⁴

Early criticism of environmental history as politics-dependent produced a noticeable shift toward cultural themes after 1990. Still, works about the "greening of American politics" that put environmentalism into context with civil rights and cultural protest have not yet focused on Kansas's ambiguous contribution to the "environmental era." With the steady opening up of the Robert J. Dole papers at the University of Kansas's Dole Institute of Politics, scholars should begin to explore such basic questions as midwestern Republicans' resistance to federal environmental-protection laws and the land-grant colleges' role in interpreting and disseminating new ecological science to agribusiness students and business customers.⁵⁵

A recent novel set in Kansas City argues that race in 2000, as it has since the 1920s, divides Plains people, haunts their politicians, and colors their perceptions

53. John E. Thorson, *River of Promise, River of Peril: The Politics of Managing the Missouri River* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Dale E. Nimz, "Damming the Kaw: The Kiro Controversy and Flood Control in the Great Depression," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 26 (Spring 2003): 14–31; Karl Brooks, "A Legacy in Concrete: The Truman Presidency Transforms America's Environment," in *Harry's Farewell: Interpreting and Teaching the Truman Presidency*, ed. Richard S. Kirkendall (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 299–322.

54. Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Owen D. Gutfreund, *20th-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

55. Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *Journal of American History* 90 (September 2003): 525–54; Rome, "What Really Matters in History? Environmental Perspectives on Modern America," *Environmental History* 7 (April 2002): 303–18.

of the American dream.⁵⁶ The first generation of suburban historians, epitomized by Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, established the close but problematic link between property, construction, cultural ideals, and highway building.⁵⁷ Since 1980 nearly 75 percent of Kansas's entire population growth has occurred in one county: the apex of Kansas City suburbia, Johnson County. The county's racial mix is overwhelmingly white. Its phenomenal rate of mall openings and tract-house project sales depends entirely on private automobiles burning relatively cheap gasoline while using federally funded highways. These facts pose important questions about power, technology, and culture which environmental history can do much to answer.⁵⁸

As did the Kansas transformed during the nineteenth century, Kansas of the century just past expressed a federal policy—perhaps even a national mandate—dedicated to realizing a vision of America on the Plains. The Jeffersonian image of independent farmers clustered near small towns spurred rail building and land disposal until about 1900. That image has steadily, and not without enormous stress and pain, crumbled in the twentieth century. Kansans are now in the midst of working out a different national identity, founded on the goal of a geographically dispersed suburbanized society. Both visions are ultimately rooted in the land. Both express powerful cultural ideals. The insights provided by environmental history since 1980 must be extended to explain the making of this very new kind of encounter between people and the Plains.

People coming to the Plains often reacted to impersonal forces by pretending they controlled the process of change. Evidence abounds of the deep-seated need to imagine we hold the power to dictate our lives by controlling nature. Historians usually have confined their researches to human-created evidence, accepting and perpetuating earlier generations' conceit.⁵⁹

History of this sort, the traditional craft that simply sorts and assesses what people have said and done, misses the rich, contingent interplay between culture and nature. Environmental historians offer instead a new appraisal of the constant communications between people and the earth's other life-forms. Looking closely at the byplay between people and animate but nonliterate forces paints a richer picture of how Kansas was made.⁶⁰ History done this way better appreciates how then became now. When written sensitively, with a dash of boldness, history attentive to all agents of change explains the important difference between choice and reaction. By giving us the vocabulary to translate this constant conversation between nature (the world we did not make) and culture (the adaptations we do choose), environmental history's best recent works offer valuable new perspectives on Kansas's past. KH

56. Whitney Terrell, *The Huntsman* (New York: Penguin Group, 2001).

57. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

58. Whitney Terrell, *The King of King's County* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), imaginatively encourages serious historical study of Plains suburbanization as a cauldron of capitalism and racism. While not so dramatic, Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004), poses questions of great historical significance rooted in the suburban experience on the Plains.

59. Hurt, *The Dust Bow*, for example, tends to credit as both accurate and proper post-1930s' accounts by Plains people that stressed technological progress, economic success, and triumphal re-ordering of nature.

60. Worster, *An Unsettled Country*.

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