The Enduring Frontier: 
The Impact of Weather on 
South Dakota History 
and Literature

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South Dakota’s frontier history brings to mind images of heroic pioneers struggling to convert the grassy prairies into acres of golden wheat. Yet, consideration of the pioneer period of the 1870s to 1890s reveals a frontier experience that had significant elements of ease as well as difficulty. By the end of the 1880s, there were factors that made agriculture in South Dakota a less strenuous ordeal than that encountered on some earlier farming frontiers. South Dakota east of the Missouri River had been crisscrossed by an excellent network of railways that conveniently brought in settlers by the thousands, hauled supplies into the booming towns and crossroads stations, and afforded the rails over which wheat and other farm products could be sent to market.¹ The soil, too, was remarkably productive. After the arduous task of breaking the first sod, the farmer, with his beasts and implements, could easily cultivate the rich, black soil that stretched away in flat or gently rolling expanses. There were no steep, rocky hillsides, which had been the bane of New England pio-

neers, nor dark, thick forests, which had confronted the settlers of Ohio.

As all of us know, however, there were great difficulties in making a living off the South Dakota prairie. These difficulties stemmed mainly from the weather, not from the land, and they have persisted long beyond the end of the frontier period, whether one adopts 1890, 1900, or 1910 as the terminal year for South Dakota's frontier phase. Indeed, the difficulties of the weather, much as the pioneer farmers experienced them a hundred years ago, are with us today. What the homesteaders encountered in South Dakota was not, strictly speaking, the frontier in the ordinary sense of the term, but something that might better be called the weather frontier.

In summer, the weather frontier in South Dakota consists of heat and drought, blowing dust storms, crop-devouring grasshoppers, hail storms, prairie fires, and an occasional cyclone. In winter, the weather frontier is marked by extreme cold and heavy snows that are brought to a peak in the periodic blizzards that sweep down from the north. In all seasons, although less so in autumn, there is the almost incessant wind that, aside from its burden of heat or dust or snow or cold, wearies the soul and the psyche with its unrelenting assault on the senses. In pioneer times, the weather frontier saw extremes of temperature ranging from 114 degrees above zero in summer to 46 below in winter.²

Let me clarify my use of the term weather frontier. By the term frontier, we ordinarily mean a time of struggle against nature as the land is conquered, so to speak, in the pioneer period of settlement. The frontier phase comes to an end after a generation or so as farms are established, towns mature, and so on. To equate struggle, then, with frontier and to examine the South Dakota situation, one sees that the struggle against the weather has long outlasted the pioneer period. Hence, the weather frontier as a struggle against weather has continued down to our own time. Or has the weather frontier in South Dakota faded since 1940?

² In 1915, S. J. Clarke of Chicago jointly published two works in five volumes: George W. Kingsbury, History of Dakota Territory, and George Martin Smith, ed., South Dakota: Its History and Its People. Kingsbury's territorial history comprised the first two volumes, while the last three volumes, written and edited by Smith, dealt with the statehood period. On the temperature extremes in the pioneer period, see Smith, South Dakota, 3:447.
Perhaps it has, but I doubt it; there is still the same array of blizzards, hard winters, drought, grasshoppers, hail storms, and prairie fires that South Dakota has always had. There has been a longstanding tendency to see the weather of the Great Plains region as constantly improving. In the early 1880s, even respected scientists thought the climate had permanently and significantly altered for the better in regard to rainfall. Seven years of drought ended that fantasy—for a time. South Dakotans from the late 1890s to 1930 might again have thought the weather frontier had withered away, but the bad conditions of the 1930s reminded them that the struggle against the weather was far from over. The generally milder character of the weather experience since 1940 in South Dakota might again lull the unwary into a sense that the weather frontier has, at last, been conquered or, at least, been significantly checked. Such an assumption would be dangerous in light of the region’s long-term history.

Perhaps the most destructive impact of the weather frontier came not in the pioneer period of the 1870s to 1890s but in the 1930s—the era of the Dust Bowl. Beginning with the terrifying “black blizzard” of 13 November 1933, South Dakota experienced a succession of dust storms in conjunction with year after year of abnormal heat and drought. This period also included some of the hardest winters the state has ever endured. Despite the adversity of the 1930s, however, the prototypical setbacks of the weather frontier that burned themselves into the historical consciousness of South Dakotans were first experienced in the pioneer era of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s—the period that coincided with the Gilded Age. In relatively quick succession, over a twenty-two-year period from 1873 to 1895, the pioneer farmers of South Dakota underwent these ordeals of the weather frontier: the grasshopper plagues from 1873 to 1877; the hard winter of 1880-1881; the great blizzard of 12 January 1888; the devastating prairie fires of 2 April 1889; and the drought years from 1889 to 1895.

In the 1930s, the "black blizzard" was the most spectacular feature of the weather frontier.
In the 1870s, the grasshoppers usually came in a period from late July to early August, after hot, dry weather had allowed their eggs to hatch. "Borne by moderate winds and resembling clouds of dust darkening the sky," historian Herbert Schell writes, "they would descend upon the countryside like local showers." Their behavior was erratic. They would not always alight; in the same neighborhood, they might hit some fields and skip others. They might stay up to six to eight days, gorging themselves in the wheat fields, or they might, depending on the wind, fly away after only one day. Thus, crop damage varied, but, in general, eastern and southeastern South Dakota were badly hurt by the grasshoppers in the years 1873, 1874, 1876, and 1877.

In 1874, an invasion of grasshoppers wiped out crops in the community of Kampeska City and, in effect, ended the existence of that pioneer settlement, the predecessor of Watertown in Codington County. In southeastern South Dakota, 1874 was also a bad year as grasshoppers in Minnehaha and other counties destroyed the seed for the planting of 1875 and left thousands near starvation. In Minnehaha, Clay, and other counties, extensive relief organizations and efforts were set up to fend off the near famine conditions. In 1877, however, the farmers of Jefferson in Union County put their trust in God rather than men. "Frenzied with grief" from the devastation of the grasshopper plague, they "decided to ask Divine Aid," and "the pastor of the Catholic Church announced at mass that a retreat was to take place. . . . Messages were dispatched as quickly as possible to all the people of the country and community. Protestants and Catholics alike came to the church the next morning. Many of them were barefoot." Led by the priest bearing a cross, a procession formed two miles south of Jefferson and then proceeded north six miles. Next, the party marched from east to west in the form of a cross. "At each of the four points they placed a simple cross and, in the cemetery at Jefferson, a larger one. The ceremonies connected with the procession were solemn, men, women, and children joining in prayer. Not long after the event great heaps of dead grasshoppers were found along the [Big] Sioux and Missouri Rivers."

6. Ibid., pp. 43-45. In Clay County, at least, there was a grasshopper interlude in 1875, and bumper crops resulted.
Whether the power of prayer or the processes of nature ended the grasshopper scourges, the next great ordeal of the weather frontier came with the unprecedentedly hard winter of 1880-1881. Although surely rivaled by that of 1949 and some others, the winter of 1880-1881 may well have been the worst ever to pound South Dakota. It began early with an omen of things to come in the blizzard of 15 October 1880, which deposited twelve to fifteen inches of snow, caused the loss of much stock, and, in the Vermillion area, knocked down telegraph wires and interrupted train service for at least three days. Up until that time, this storm was the worst blizzard recorded in the history of Dakota Territory, but it was only the beginning. In May 1881, snow was still standing on the ground following repeated cold snaps and blizzards. During this long, hard winter, the temperature dropped to 40 below at least twice, while readings of 10, 16, and 24 below were quite common as at least four more major blizzards swept the countryside, the last occurring on 17 March 1881. April was abnormally cold, and the last snow did not melt until May.9

The greatest one-day weather disaster in South Dakota history was probably the blizzard of 12 January 1888. For that dubious distinction, it might have been challenged by the aforementioned "black blizzard" of 13 November 1933, but the black blizzard resulted in few if any deaths, while at least 170 people lost their lives in the great blizzard of 1888.10 The main reason for the great loss of life was the fact that the blizzard struck without warning all over the state not long before noon, after a morning that had been quite warm and pleasant for the season. The time of its impact—that is, right before noon—meant that it caught children and their teachers in rural schoolhouses and farmers away from their dwellings.

In the local histories and annals of South Dakota, no event of the weather frontier has been as often mentioned or as fully chronicled as the onset and duration of the great blizzard of 1888.11 Its sudden appearance on the horizon struck well justified


10. Untitled outline map (showing fatalities, county by county), s.v. "Blizzard of 1888," Vertical Files, SDHRC.

11. Among the most complete accounts are those found in N. J. Dunham, *A History of Jerauld County, South Dakota* (Wessington Springs, S.Dak.: n.p., 1910),
During the hard winter of 1880-1881, merchants in Watertown (and elsewhere) were cut off from eastern suppliers when repeated blizzards, record cold temperatures, and deep snows interrupted train service.

terror into those who saw its approach. Typical was the experience of N. E. Williams, teacher of the Nesmith school near Viola in Jerauld County. He and his pupils were outdoors on the balmy morning for recess when, as he described it, "a sudden whiff of cold air caused us all to turn and look toward the north, where we

chaps. 21-25, and in C. H. Ellis, History of Faulk County, South Dakota (Faulkton, S.Dak.: Record Print, 1909), pp. 52-58. Much information can also be found in the "Blizzard of 1888" folder in the SDHRC Vertical Files. See also Kingsbury, Dakota Territory, 2:1512-14.
Near Groton, a blizzard stopped the trains in January 1897 (above). A few months later, the same stretch of track (opposite page) was again unusable when the melting snow turned the area into a temporary lake.

saw what appeared to be a huge cloud rolling over and over along the ground, blotting out the view of the nearby hills and covering everything in that direction as with a blanket. There was scarcely time to exclaim at the unusual appearance when the cloud struck us with awful violence and in an instant the warm and quiet day was changed into a howling pandemonium of ice and snow.”

To a Norwegian farm woman in Grant County, who was sitting at her sewing machine next to a window, it “all of a sudden” turned “dark—just like someone had hung a blanket up over the window. I looked up and it looked like a snowbank against the window. Was I ever scared!”

There were many stories told of heroism and survival—of how, for example, an eighteen-year-old school boy rallied six younger pupils and the young woman who taught them to endure through a night of 30-below temperature by burrowing deeply into a two-

12. Quoted in Dunham, Jerauld County, p. 177.
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Unfortunately, in spite of such heroism, many people did die during that twenty-four hour ordeal of wind, snow, and cold, including the wife and daughter of a young Norwegian farmer in Aurora County in an episode of the sort that Ole Rølvaag might have included in *Giants in the Earth*. In a letter dated 19 January 1888 to his brother and sister-in-law in Illinois, John Jensen told how he had been caught in the blizzard near a neighbor’s house and “could hardly see” his hand in front of him. He made it to the neighbor’s house about 7:00 p.m., but he was afraid that he would never see his family again. His neighbor had to cut off his frozen clothes. While he spent a cold night in this friend’s house, he felt fortunate to be alive, and, as he wrote, he “thought the storm would soon let up a little.” It lasted through the night, and Jensen did not start home until seven the next morning. “When I came home,” he records, “I found my loving wife outside the house, froze to death, and then I went into the house and there lay Alvilda [his daughter] on the floor, froze to death.” Looking around, he concluded: “After what I can see from the tracks she [his wife] had gone to the stable. She had many clothes on but that didn’t help. She was a very good wife and it makes me feel that I wish I was dead. But it must be God’s

South Dakota received a catastrophic one-two punch from the weather frontier in 1888-1889. The first blow had been the great blizzard of 12 January 1888. The second was the scourge of prairie fires that, from north to south, destroyed towns and farms in April 1889 in the worst bout of such fires ever experienced in the state. A rainless spring, following the relatively dry summer of 1888 and mild winter of 1889, had turned the South Dakota prairies into a tinderbox by the first and second of April 1889. Breaking out here and there, fires were swept forward on the wings of sixty- to eighty-mile-an-hour gales blowing out of the northwest. One of the hardest hit areas was McPherson County, which during the decade had been gaining a large influx of German farmers from Russia. In the Arena Valley of McPherson County, a straw pile had been harmlessly smoldering for two weeks when, on 2 April, the hurricane winds fanned it to life and sent it swirling over the prairies to the new town of Leola. The town’s three hundred citizens were almost wholly burned out as eighty buildings were left in smoking ruins. The flames blazed on toward Aberdeen, where that budding metropolis was spared heavy damage.

15. English translation of Jensen’s letter, Wessington Springs Independent, 14 Jan. 1971, s.v. “Blizzard of 1888,” Vertical Files, SDHRC. Jensen’s, or the translator’s, grammatical errors have been preserved in the quotation.

In October 1909, a prairie fire burned across the range land near Wakpala, South Dakota.
when the prairie fire was checked by the grade and yards of the Milwaukee Road on the northwest edge of town.16

Also devastated in the April blaze was a long, wide belt of townships in the three adjacent counties of Hand, Buffalo, and Jerauld. Here, the giant prairie fire started on the evening of April first, when a farmer near Ree Heights lit his pipe and carelessly tossed the match into a manure pile. The next morning, 2 April, eighty-mile-an-hour winds fanned the smoldering pile into a fire storm two townships wide that destroyed the town of Ree Heights and swept within a mile of Miller before burning a swathe through large stretches of Buffalo and Jerauld counties far to the south. Under similar conditions of dry grasses and gale-force winds, hundreds of prairie fires sprang up elsewhere on that calamitous day in South Dakota, including one that destroyed Mount Vernon near Mitchell.17

The agony of drought that the weather frontier inflicted on the pioneer farmers of South Dakota from 1889 to 1895 did not provide any spectacular single episode like the great blizzard of 1888 or the prairie fires of 2 April 1889, but the long-term impact of seven years of almost constant drought was much more damaging. With the state undergoing a severe aridity in 1889, "hard times" were an accepted fact in South Dakota by early 1890. The relief efforts of the Farmers' Alliance and other groups were overwhelmed in the face of the growing calamity. With good crops in 1891, hopes rose but were dampened by continuing high interest rates. In Aurora and other counties, farm foreclosures began to increase, and the crisis turned into a three-year catastrophe when the financial panic of June 1893 was followed by the drought years of 1893, 1894, and 1895. Although there were local variations, with some farmers suffering appreciably less than others, the general condition was almost total crop failure in 1894 and 1895. In 1894, Clay County, for example, went through its worst drought until the 1930s.18

The experience of Beadle County (whose county seat was Huron) in 1894 and 1895 was typical of the state as a whole. In the good years of the early and middle 1880s, the wheat farmers of Beadle County had been getting forty bushels to the acre from their fields of No. 1 hard spring wheat, but with the searing droughts of 1894-1895 (which were still remembered forty years later), there was a disastrous failure of the wheat crop. In the earlier years of bumper crops, "many of the farmers" of Beadle County "had bought expensive farm machinery and mortgaged their farms." During the early and middle 1890s, "a large proportion of the land" in the county "was sold under mortgage foreclosure and fell into the hands of non-residents." In this time period, "hundreds of farms were abandoned, and the population decreased" as "people left the county by the hundreds every year." Just to the west of Beadle County, Hand County was undergoing a similar collapse as its population fell from 7,057 in 1885 to only 4,657 ten years later. Of course, these were the years in which desperate and angry farmers flocked to the polls to vote for the Independent and Populist candidates at every level, revolting against their normal Republican party allegiance. Not until 1898-1900 did renewed prosperity in South Dakota bring a return to the rule of the Republican party.

The revolt of the farmers against the railroad and grain-elevator companies and against the dominance of the Republican party was an attempt to alter in the farmers' favor a structure of economics and politics that other men had created. More perplexing, though, was how to fight the powers of nature that mobilized the weather frontier against the pioneers. A key need in light of the repeated droughts was somehow to increase South Dakota's scanty water resources. By the 1880s, the attempt was underway to tap the marvelous artesian-water basin that lay beneath the ground in the James River country and elsewhere. Ultimately,

the artesian-water source was successfully tapped—especially after 1900 when Peter Norbeck's deep-drilling crews were deployed far and near to serve the needs of eager farmers. Until then, artesian wells had an almost magic but often frustrating quality about them. During the 1890s, four or five towns in the state were lit with the electricity generated by the force of artesian wells, but at times that force was unconquerable. Woonsocket, for example, claimed that its ninety-six-foot-high artesian jet was the most powerful in the world, but the flow was so enormous that it could not be controlled, and the well finally had to be capped.

Just as water from underground could not always be used, in the drought years there was a lack of it from the skies as well.

This situation brought forth hopes in behalf of the hustling rainmakers. One such would-be precipitation-producing professional was a Kansas man named Morris, who sought to market his skills in the parched summer of 1893. Farmers on the eastern slope of the James River Valley were first to hire him, and Morris “guaranteed to produce a half-inch of rain over an area of 300 sq. m. within five days, or receive nothing; if successful, he was to be paid $500.” Shortly after he began his operations, “dark clouds hovered overhead and the farmers were jubilant. But on the second day a brisk wind sprang up, sweeping the clouds eastward.” That evening, Watertown, fifty miles to the east, “received a drenching downpour.” The rainmaker claimed that this was his
precipitation, which the wind had carried away. "Undismayed by his first defeat," the report continued, "Morris persisted in his efforts, and on the evening of the last day the promised area had received a full half-inch of rain, and the rainmaker his $500." With victory, Morris received offers from all over the area. He moved his operations to Aberdeen, but he "found entrenched there a rival named Capt. Hauser, who had begun operations in the top story of a business building, erecting on the roof a long pipe that emitted a stream of evil-smelling gases day and night. With both rainmakers working desperately, Brown Co. residents fully expected a cloudburst." Three rainless days later, Hauser ran out of time, but Morris still had two days remaining. "On the last day Morris once more brought rain, dampening the Fourth of July picnics. The thirsty soil received more than .5 in., and Morris again collected $500." 25

The credulous and the desperately hopeful believed in the rain-making efforts; others did not, but for all, there was an element of diversion and entertainment in watching the mysterious activities of the rainmakers. Large crowds frequently turned out to see what would happen when a rainmaker began operations. This diversion served, in part, to sate the needs of South Dakotans who, buffeted by the weather frontier and the hard times, were avid for escape—for anything that would take their minds off their troubles. The spectacular, gushing, uncapped artesian wells captivated them, and the rainmakers—whatever was thought of them—were always interesting. Something else that was explicitly meant to entertain, to give release to frazzled emotions after the toil and tension of the harvest season, was the grain-festival movement of the 1890s.

Growing naturally out of South Dakota's agricultural economy, the grain festival celebrated the triumphant response to the weather frontier. Grain festivals that centered around lavishly decorated buildings were held in Sioux City and Plankinton in the early nineties. 26 Aberdeen bowed in with its Grain Palace of 1893.


Grain palaces in Sioux City, Iowa (above), Plankinton (right), Aberdeen (below), and Mitchell (opposite page) celebrated the farmers' triumph over the weather frontier.
which covered half a block at Main and Fifth and enclosed an auditorium that seated sixteen hundred people. The annual fall festival was "presided over by the Grain Lady known as the Queen of Aberdeen. She was wholly garbed in grains and grasses, on her head [was] a crown of the same. Her left hand held flowers and upon her wrist was poised a live pigeon." The outside of the Aberdeen Grain Palace was covered with beautiful designs made of local grains and grasses, but the building burned soon after 1900, and Aberdeen yielded supremacy in the grain-festival competition to its rival, Mitchell. The Mitchell Corn Palace was pure fantasy when it opened in the heart of the city in the fall of 1892. The building was "of Moorish design, with nine towers and minarets, the decorations being Mosaic, Arabesque and Grecian." The exterior was decorated with "corns, grains and grasses... until

the towers seemed to be solid grain—mostly corn.” The building itself “was lighted with incandescent globes.”

Back in Aberdeen, the most intriguing figure on the cultural scene of the Gilded Age in South Dakota had earlier amused and diverted his readers through the medium of a weekly newspaper column. This was L. Frank Baum. Later to be famous for writing *The Wizard of Oz*, Baum resided in Aberdeen from 1888 to 1891. His first endeavor in the Hub City was to open a variety store called Baum’s Bazaar, but the drought and bad crops of 1889 brought an end to his business. He then turned to what was probably a more congenial occupation: editing and publishing an Aberdeen newspaper, which he took over in 1890 and renamed the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer.* The newspaper was an economic failure, no doubt due to the hard times, and Baum discontinued it in March 1891, reportedly because “the sheriff wanted it more than he did.” Baum moved himself and his family to Chicago, and in 1900, *The Wizard of Oz* came out, to be followed by other books in the Oz series.

Looking back on Baum’s South Dakota phase, the high point from our perspective was the column that Baum wrote for his Aberdeen newspaper from January 1890 to February 1891. The column, entitled “Our Landlady,” featured a fictitious Aberdeen boardinghouse proprietress—a three-hundred-pound widow named Mrs. Bilkins—and her boarders. Through this literary device, Baum produced engaging weekly installments of humor, satirical treatment of local personages and events, and fantasy. The popular column was eagerly awaited by Aberdonians, who looked forward to Baum’s joshing treatments of such leading citizens as Alonzo Ward and the grocery magnate, Harvey C. Jewett. With Mrs. Bilkins as his mouthpiece, in much the same way that Mr. Dooley was the mouthpiece of Finley Peter Dunne, Baum satirized such matters as rainmakers, prohibition, and federal policy in regard to the ghost-dancing Sioux Indians. The hard times of the early 1890s and the exploitation of the farmers were also among his targets in “Our Landlady.” Two columns, at least, were


30. South Dakota Writers’ Project, “*Our Landlady*”, p. 3.
notable for their fantasy and do, indeed, give intimations of the genius Baum would demonstrate in *The Wizard of Oz.*

One of these columns was a futuristic treatment of "air ships." The other was Baum's most well developed fantasy column. It appeared on 3 January 1891, and it told how Mrs. Bilkins went for a country jaunt outside of Aberdeen, got lost, and ended up at the farm of the scientist Aesop Downditch. Knowing nothing of Downditch or his farm, she found to her surprise that the latter was an all-electric farm with power generated by an artesian well. She stayed overnight and to breakfast the next day and found that virtually all operations were performed by automatic electrical equipment. Mrs. Bilkins was undressed for bed by electrically operated robotlike instruments, and all table service, as well as virtually everything else, was achieved by similar means. Mrs. Bilkins loved the farm and went back to her boardinghouse babbling of its luxuries.

What Baum had depicted was an electrical utopia in the midst of South Dakota's hard times of the early 1890s. In contrast to the hardworking farmers who found themselves losing out to the weather frontier and the depressed economy, Downditch lived a life of miraculous ease on a farm replete with electrically assisted productivity. In all of this are little touches that forecast the wonders and bounties of the Land of Oz, and Downditch, although not depicted as a fake, has features that remind one of the Wizard of Oz. Downditch, for example, is always smiling—by electricity! In the column, Baum gently but firmly indicated the contrast between his fancied electrical utopia and the humdrum, discouraging life of Aberdeen, the surrounding farmsteads, and the drought-and-depression-ridden time of the early nineties. Thus, under an electric blanket, Mrs. Bilkins is lulled to sleep by an electrical music box playing the strains of "Hard Times Come Agin No More."

It seems certain, then, that L. Frank Baum's South Dakota period, brief as it was, had an important formative influence on his writing in the Oz books. It is fairly obvious that the grim life and surroundings that Dorothy and her family experienced on their Kansas farm were modeled upon the hard circumstances of Brown County farmers that Baum had seen firsthand. It seems

31. Ibid., pp. 3-4; Pioneer Committee, *Early History of Brown County,* p. 51.
33. Ibid., pp. 40-44.
apparent, too, that Baum's experiences in Aberdeen nurtured his innate powers of fantasy, of which we see flashes in the "Our Landlady" columns. Thus, the impact of the Dakota prairies and their weather frontier was reflected in the Aberdeen writings of L. Frank Baum. Although Baum did not remain in South Dakota to take part in the development of a literary tradition, such a tradition did emerge, combining the experiences of prairie farming, the weather frontier, and small-town life—a tradition that can be termed South Dakota prairie fiction. This output of writing has come down to our own time as a testament, especially to the impact of the weather frontier on the imaginative consciousness of South Dakotans.  

Hamlin Garland was the originator of the literary tradition of South Dakota prairie fiction with his stories in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891); his 1909 novel, *The Moccasin Ranch*; and his satirical treatment of the ill-fated boomtown of Ordway (north of Aberdeen), whose promoters he lampooned in his never-finished novel "The Rise of Boomtown." Garland got the inspiration for the story "Mrs. Ripley's Trip," which became the nucleus of *Main-Travelled Roads*, from a tale that his mother told him on one of his visits to his parents' Brown County homestead in the 1880s. One of the stories in *Main-Travelled Roads*, "Among the Corn Rows," has its setting in South Dakota. There are other South-Dakota-inspired touches in the book, but the key thing is the alteration in Garland's own literary sensibility, which came from

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his visits to his parents' farm near Ordway and from his own brief career as a homesteader in McPherson County in 1883-1884. Garland wrote that his experience of the weather frontier in the form of a raging McPherson County blizzard permanently cured him of his homesteading ambitions and drove him eastward to the literary career that would become his life. From his South Dakota phase, as he indicated in his autobiographical *A Son of the Middle Border*, Garland gained the passionate sympathy for and the sense of rebellion of the farmer that imbues the pages of *Main-Travelled Roads*.  

After Garland's publication of *Main-Travelled Roads* in 1891, there was a considerable gap before the next round of South Dakota prairie fiction began with the publication in 1927 of Ole E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. Five years later, *Turkey Red* (1932) by Francis Gilchrist Wood came off the press, and thereafter a steady stream of South Dakota prairie novels appeared through 1944. The interval between Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* in 1891 and the cycle of novels from 1927 to 1944 is explained, perhaps, by the fact that, although the writers of these novels had grown up in South Dakota or close by, it took them some time to assimilate the scenes and impressions of their childhood and youth into the service of their fiction.

Although Hamlin Garland initiated the tradition of South Dakota prairie fiction, in which the weather frontier is of key importance, it was Ole E. Rølvaag who produced the prototypical novel in his *Giants in the Earth*. Rølvaag's intent was to encompass the Norwegian immigrant experience, of which he himself was an example, in the form of a trilogy of novels, with *Giants in the Earth* as the first. He brilliantly etches the psychology and social relationships of the Norwegian immigrant farm families who homesteaded between the Big Sioux and James rivers in the 1870s. Rølvaag did not immigrate to South Dakota in time to experience firsthand the weather frontier of the 1870s and 1880s, but he learned much about those times from talking to people who had, especially the six larger-than-life Berdahl brothers, one of whom was Rølvaag's father-in-law. In *Giants in the Earth*, one of Rølvaag's leading themes is the failure to adjust to the climate and the land, which he depicts in the case of Beret, the wife of Per Hansa, the book's protagonist. It is a theme grounded in reality, for it is estimated that, during the Great Dakota Boom of 1878-1887, two out of every four or five of those who came into the territory eventually left the land. Hamlin Garland is a good example of an actual homesteader who did not stay, and eventually

his father and mother also left South Dakota. Thus, Rølvaag realistically portrays his fictional Beret as wanting desperately to return to the settled security of the old country, and historic events of the weather frontier, which are discussed above, provide climactic episodes in the book. The grasshopper invasion of 1873 precipitates Beret’s long bout of mental illness, and Per Hansa, himself, perishes out on the prairie during a blizzard in the hard winter of 1880-1881.

In contrast, three writers of the 1930s celebrated the pioneers’ conquest of the weather frontier. They were Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose Wilder Lane, and Francis Gilchrist Wood. Wood had apparently been a late nineteenth century homesteader near Le Beau in Walworth County and worked for the newspaper in Appomattox in Potter County, a personal background that she effectively drew upon for her novel *Turkey Red*. The story is about a colony of Union veterans of the Civil War who, in the 1880s, establish the homesteading community of “Antietam” in Potter County. A tribute to what Wood, with a Turnerian touch, called the last frontier, *Turkey Red* contains realistic treatments of hail, blizzards, prairie fires, and droughts. Depictions of the coping strategies of the pioneers include such aspects of homesteader folklore as the custom of hanging lanterns from tall poles outside claim shanties or sod houses to guide travelers across the dark or stormy prairies. *Turkey Red*’s protagonists, a husband and wife, eventually move from their claim to town, where they publish a newspaper and participate in a rousing county-seat fight that is based on a real event in Potter County history. The novel closes twenty-five years after its opening, with the editor and his wife trying to combat the stereotyped inaccuracies and fakery injected into the homesteaders’ silver-jubilee celebration by egotistical newcomers who did not know what the settlers had really gone through.

The South Dakota weather frontier in the vicinity of De Smet made a great impression on Laura Ingalls Wilder and her daugh-

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43. Garland, *Son of the Middle Border*, chaps. 25, 35.
Novelists like Hamlin Garland, Ole Rølvaag, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Rose Wilder Lane made South Dakota's massive snowfalls famous. In the early twentieth century, blizzards buried such towns as Madison (at left) and White Lake (below).
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ter, Rose Wilder Lane. Laura Ingalls and her husband, Almanzo Wilder, managed to survive the hard winters of the 1880s, but the droughts of the early 1890s exiled them and their young daughter to a refuge amidst the greenery of the Missouri Ozarks. Neither mother nor daughter ever forgot the Dakota years. Although the weather frontier ultimately defeated the Wilders, the writings of both Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane stress triumph rather than failure.*^ In her autobiographical novels for children, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote much about the heavy snows and blizzards the Ingalls family endured in the De Smet area. Such books in the “Little House” series as The Long Winter and Little Town on the Prairie present a child’s-eye view of the ordeal of 1880-1881 and the periodic blockading of De Smet by massive snowfalls.^[48] Through Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books, millions of children the world over have become familiar with South Dakota’s weather frontier.^[49]

Although not as well known now as her mother, Rose Wilder Lane was a well-established, well-known author and reporter long before her mother published the first “Little House” book.^[50] Lane wrote two adult novels that reflected her sense of the weather frontier. One South Dakotan charged that Rose Wilder Lane had a “blizzard complex,”^[51] and it is certainly true that no writer in the tradition of South Dakota prairie fiction has written more fully, more authentically, and more grippingly about South Dakota blizzards than Rose Wilder Lane did. In her Free Land (1938), a young homesteading couple in the De Smet vicinity suffer through a winter much like that of 1880-1881 in which, among many blizzards, they are beset by one that closely resembles the storm of 12 January 1888.^[52] Lane’s first venture into fictional blizzardology, however, came in her 1933 novella, Let the Hurricane

50. Ibid., pp. 310, 312-14, 319; Twentieth-Century Authors, 1942, s.v. “Lane, Mrs. Rose (Wilder).”
Roar, which starts out with a grasshopper invasion but settles down into the hard winter of 1880-1881. This quite stylized, almost dreamlike piece of fiction is a minor gem, but it lacks the sustained power and fully realized characters and episodes to be found in her later, much more mature achievement, Free Land.

Three late writers of South Dakota prairie novels (1938-1944) were markedly influenced by the Dust Bowl era of South Dakota, which occurred before their novels were published. One of these writers, J. Hyatt Downing, grew up in Blunt, and another, Horace Kramer, grew up in Yankton. The third, Frederick Manfred, was not a native South Dakotan but grew up nearby in the Big Sioux River country of northwest Iowa. In Downing’s A Prayer for Tomorrow (1938), the main action occurs not in the country but in the small town of Rudge, closely based on Downing’s hometown of Blunt, South Dakota. The protagonist is a youth, Lynn McVeigh, whose story we follow from adolescence to college years, paralleling the early twentieth century history of the boomtown phase of Rudge. The novel combines themes of a young man’s coming of age and of small-town life reminiscent of Spoon River Anthology and Main Street. It also explores the cautionary idea that on land like that around Rudge (or Blunt), agriculture should never have been transformed from cattle raising to wheat farming. The novel’s farming boom ends in collapse for both townspeople and farmers as a succession of bad years is climax ed by a summer of searing heat and drought (which may have been based on the drought of 1911), featuring a horrendous dust storm that was clearly based on those of the 1930s.

Downing’s message that vast stretches of the Great Plains should never have been converted to farming was a popular one among the natural and social scientists of the 1930s, and it was one that also appears in Horace Kramer’s appropriately entitled

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1939 novel *Marginal Land.* The setting of Kramer's novel is Brule County in the 1880s and 1890s, and the small town that appears in it from time to time may have been based on the county seat, Brule City. The protagonist is a young rancher who persists and succeeds in his duel with the weather frontier in contrast to his neighbor and counterpart, a young homesteading wheat grower. The latter battles against drought and hard winters and eventually loses his life to a prairie fire that is reminiscent of the great one of 2 April 1889.

Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* has long since become a classic American novel. The books by Wood, Lane, Downing, and Kramer are not in the same class as literature, but they are all readable, interesting, and authentic. Although largely forgotten today, they would well repay a reading by anyone interested in South Dakota history and literature. On the other hand, *The Golden Bowl* by Frederick Manfred has achieved lasting literary stature. Published in 1944, Manfred's novel—his first—dealt

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*Small-town life in Blunt, South Dakota, after the turn of the century is one of the themes of author J. Hyatt Downing.*
with the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s. The book is set on a farm about twenty miles east of the Badlands. It begins with the black blizzard of November 1933, in which the son of the farm family loses his life. In spite of this loss and repeated crop failures, the family refuses to leave the land and its blowing, drifting dust. The book is beautifully written, especially in its descriptions of nature and the land, while the fearsome dust storms that sweep through the pages of the book are stunningly described. There are no messages in this novel to the effect that the land should have been left unfarmed; instead, the theme is one of persistence and faith in the land. The book’s epilogue is a vision of the golden bowl of wheat that the land is destined to be once again. By the time the book was published in 1944, the rains had returned to the prairies of South Dakota, producing the bumper crops of World War II.

Since the 1930s, the hard winters, blizzards, droughts, dust storms, grasshoppers, hail storms, and fires have continued to afflict the prairies of South Dakota but with less intensity than in...
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the period from 1873 to 1895 or in the 1930s. Or, perhaps, it is the ravages of the weather frontier that have been reduced, in part, by improved human strategies developed since the 1930s. While far from having disappeared, the weather frontier seems to have mellowed, perhaps only temporarily, and people seem to have become somewhat more successful in mitigating its impact. This situation may explain the fact that since 1944 there has been only one prominent example of the South Dakota prairie novel—*Leaving the Land* by Douglas Unger, which appeared in 1984. The setting for this book is the Hogan family farm, twelve miles from the town of “Nowell,” northeast of the Black Hills. The fictional town of Nowell seems to be based on the real town of Newell, located twenty-five miles north of Sturgis and twenty-seven miles west of Belle Fourche. The time is the period from World War II to the recent past. The weather frontier appears in a blizzard and a dust storm in this novel of high quality, but the nemesis of the Hogan family is corporate agribusiness, which, in this fictional case, first ruins and then abandons the land and the community.

The tradition of South Dakota prairie fiction has surely faded since the 1940s, but it is too early to write its epitaph. Not only has there been the recent appearance of *Leaving the Land* by Unger, but there is another more sustained, even more distinctive example of prairie fiction that reveals the changing, yet vital, survival of the tradition. I refer to the nationally syndicated public radio program “A Prairie Home Companion,” featuring the fictional Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon, a product of the imagination and literary genius of Garrison Keillor. True, the setting is Minnesota and not South Dakota, but in terms of its character and its inhabitants, Lake Wobegon could just as well be located in eastern South Dakota as in Minnesota. The weather frontier—

59. Afflictions of the weather frontier in recent decades include the hard winter of 1949, the drought of 1976, and the grasshopper infestations of 1979 and 1984. Recently published South Dakota local histories record other effects of the weather frontier in this period.

60. Improved coping strategies include the shelter belts of trees planted in the 1930s and improved seed that makes it possible to grow winter wheat all over South Dakota.


62. The location of the fictional “Nowell” matches that of the real Newell, but turkey raising, which is featured in the novel, has never been prevalent in the Newell area.
especially blizzards, heavy snow, and cold weather—frequently appears in the high point of the program, Garrison Keillor's weekly monologue entitled "The News from Lake Wobegon." The authenticity of what we hear of Lake Wobegon and its surrounding farms each week is great: the ethnic and religious mix of Germans and Norwegians, with Father Emil and his Catholic church and Pastor Ingvist and his Lutherans, as well as such local families as the Bunsens and the Soderbergs and such local institutions as the Side-Track Tap, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Bob's Bank, Dorothy's Chatterbox Cafe, Skoglunds's Five and Dime, and the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian (no doubt a victim of the weather frontier in the pioneer days). All of these characters and details brilliantly and humorously catch the flavor and spirit of small-town life among the prairie farms of the upper Midwest of Minnesota and the Dakotas. Keillor's sketches, vignettes, and tales of Lake Wobegon life, delivered in his weekly monologue in the interest of humor, are truly funny, but they are much more than humorous pieces. They deal with universals of human behavior and enduring issues of human existence that are the mark of
the regionalist at his or her best. While his art is far different from that of Garland, Rølvaag, and Manfred, Garrison Keillor can be seen, broadly, as belonging in the same tradition of prairie regionalist writing that they represent.63

In conclusion, I suggest that South Dakota deeply imprints itself upon those who grow up in the state. I suspect that this is as true for personalities like Tom Brokaw and Allen H. Neuharth as it is for any of us reading this journal.64 It seems to me that one thing crucial to this imprinting process is the impact of the weather frontier—a factor that links us to the pioneer South Dakotans of territorial times and to those who survived the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s.


64. Tom Brokaw currently anchors the NBC television *Nightly News*, and Allen H. Neuharth, founder of the regionally oriented national daily newspaper *USA Today*, is chairman of Gannett Company, Inc. Both men are native South Dakotans.
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