

THOMAS D. ISERN

Historical Musings

Toward a Greater Great Plains: Remarks on Publication of *The Plains Political Tradition, Volume 2*

I once was a tool of oppression,
As green as a sucker could be,
And monopolies banded together
To beat a poor hayseed like me.

The railroads and old party bosses
Together did sweetly agree;
And they thought there would be little trouble
In working a hayseed like me.

But now I've roused up a little
And their greed and corruption I see.
And the ticket we vote next November
Will be made up of hayseeds like me.¹

In the days of the Farmers' Alliance of the late nineteenth century, chip-on-the-shoulder rhetoric assailing distant and dastardly interests was current and applicable, whether or not it was constructive. The chip remained on the shoulder of prairie people throughout most of the twentieth century, partly because of the continuing colonial condi-

This essay was originally presented as the keynote address at "Exploring South Dakota's Political Tradition," a conference sponsored by the University of South Dakota Department of Political Science, Department of History, and University Libraries and held on the campus in Vermillion on 13 November 2014.

1. "The Hayseed" (sung to the tune of "Save an Old Sinner Like Me"), *Farmers' Alliance Songs of the 1890's*, Nebraska Folklore Pamphlet 18 (Lincoln: Federal Writers' Project in Nebraska, 1938), p. 1, available online at <http://memories.ne.gov/cdm/ref/collection/hr/id/60>.

tions of regional life and partly because of habit—a resistance *mentalité*, or an established tradition of fatalistic blame.²

In the twenty-first century the trope of victimization sounds quaint. It is a matter of historical reflection. In a landmark report entitled *The Rise of the Great Plains: Regional Opportunity in the 21st Century*, geographer Joel Kotkin flicks our historic chip onto the kindling pile and recasts our region as a prairie of promise. Our resource economies situate us well in relation to global demands; our deployment of technologies has made moot our previously problematic relationship with the regional environment; and the Great Plains are a magnet for young, vigorous, talented people. All these things, Kotkin observes, “augur well for the future of the Great Plains. Once forlorn and seemingly soon-to-be abandoned, the Great Plains enters the 21st century with a prairie wind at its back.”³ We people of the Great Plains are living the good life, with all its pleasures and dislocations.

Between the covers of this fine book, *The Plains Political Tradition, Volume 2*, we find postcolonial voices of the twenty-first-century Great Plains, a greater Great Plains than previously experienced in any of our lifetimes.⁴ We render thanks to every author in this anthology for laboring at the forge, striking constructive blows toward the fashioning of a greater Great Plains that reflects upon its history, learns from it, but is not bound by it. More specific thanks should go to anthology editors Jon K. Lauck, John E. Miller, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr., for providing the forum in which the authors’ voices will be heard. Let us not forget the South Dakota Historical Society Press, a messenger for the emergent identity of the Northern Great Plains. The aspirational vision of the press shows in its expansive line of quality publications

2. See Carl F. Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), for his discussion of “minority behavior” traits among the population of the plains.

3. Joel Kotkin, *The Rise of the Great Plains: Regional Opportunity in the 21st Century* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, Office of the President, 2012), p. 4.

4. Jon K. Lauck, John E. Miller, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr., *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota Political Culture, Volume 2* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014). Throughout the essay, page references to quotations from the book appear in parentheses within the text.

and in its support of reflective enterprises such as *The Plains Political Tradition*.

It is my intent to comment briefly on each of the individual contributions this anthology comprises, based on a close and appreciative reading. I also intend to argue for a greater history of the Great Plains that is faithful to the historical realities of our region but also pertinent to the aspirational character of our times. In my own work I labor for a history of agency, complexity, and memory, and those three touchstones will be evident in my remarks.

In crafting an introduction to the anthology, Lauck, Miller, and Simmons face the problem endemic to anthologies—how to make the thing hang together. It is an exercise in federalism that they navigate well—first, by acknowledging the conservative character of the commonwealth, but second, by drawing attention to the “underlying nuances,” “variations,” and “subcultures” evident in the chapters of the book and in the state of South Dakota (p. 1). The editors direct us off the red lines of the political map and onto its blue highways. This choice of route not only makes for an interesting drive, but also makes the nuances and variations and subcultures accessible and visible. If there is nothing but variation in the landscape, one sees nothing. If there is a fundamental cast that serves as context and background, then you see and appreciate the singular features set upon it.

The adoption of the initiative and the referendum in 1898 by South Dakota, the first state to embrace these instruments of direct democracy, is one of those singular features. Brad Tennant credits this reform to the political ferment of the 1890s, observing, “The Populist Party generally receives the greatest share of the credit for the eventual adoption of the initiative” (p. 15). The “truest significance” of the reform, he argues, “lies in its origins” (p. 24). Accepting this thesis, we may infer another lasting significance. The initiative and referendum facilitate the rise of new ideas from the body politic. Every initiated measure cataloged in Tennant’s comprehensive table is an incipient emergence that not only takes the temperature of the people but also embodies agency in its own right, with the potential to change how the state operates.

THE PLAINS POLITICAL TRADITION

ESSAYS ON SOUTH DAKOTA POLITICAL CULTURE

VOLUME 2

EDITED BY

JON K. LAUCK, JOHN E. MILLER &
DONALD C. SIMMONS, JR.



The essay on chartermongering, by Robert E. Wright, is perhaps the most surprising blue-line nuance mapped in this anthology. In the interlude between Populism and Progressivism, when “trust” was a four-letter word in South Dakota, officials and insiders sought to make the Sunshine State a safe harbor for corporations in order to harvest taxes and fees from them. They worked to make South Dakota another New Jersey, but, as Wright concludes, “South Dakota’s foray into chartermongering ultimately failed” (p. 40). Lest we think of this episode as an anomaly, he draws the applicable parallels to the heyday of Sioux Falls as a divorce capital and to the luring of Citibank to South Dakota nearly a century later. The use of state legislation and state sanction to create economic advantage may be, as Wright says, a fickle proposition, but it is, arguably, exceedingly Republican.

Nathan Sanderson’s exploration of the roots of Republican dominance in the region west of the Missouri River is notable for its effective use of the doctrine of sensitive dependence on initial conditions. Republicanism here originated in the hearts of settlers who came from Republican residences back east and took root in an environment distinct from that of East River. On account of the area’s delayed settlement, its Republicanism was untainted by the leftist tendencies of Populism and fed the desires of late-starting West River for regional development. Sanderson writes, “The Republican political tradition born in the early twentieth century has continued into the twenty-first” (p. 54), and, “Since the early 1900s, voters in the West River country have demonstrated consistent support for the Republican Party” (p. 71). That constancy leads him to conclude that “the West River country may be the state’s most representative region” (p. 71).

Some variations in the political landscape sprang up only to die on the vine, as shown by Thomas Biolsi’s study of the South Dakota State Planning Board. Bright and positivistic New Dealers sought to implement scientific management of the land through classification of lands and regulation of their use in a process mandated from the top but implemented at the grassroots. The experiment did not go well, for, as Biolsi concludes, “The best-laid plans of the most dedicated citizen-planners foundered on the reluctance of the grass roots to go along” (pp. 94–95). Collective governance of land use ran counter to

the conservative culture of those holding the land—and those in the state legislature. In other words, South Dakotans preferred to let land-use patterns emerge rather than have them imposed, even by their own neighbors.

As Matthew Pehl narrates, South Dakotans' embracing of right-to-work legislation in the 1940s further defined the conservative ethos of the state. South Dakota was "more prophetic than peripheral" (p. 104) in this matter, says Pehl, adopting right-to-work laws ahead of the national trend. Moreover, Representative Francis H. Case carried his state's labor values, qualified somewhat by his own definition, into the United States Congress, as "a fine channel for the conservative pragmatism of his constituents" (p. 120). Certainly interests—business, labor, and partisan—were at work in this process, but in line with the cultural approach evident in the anthology, Pehl interprets right-to-work not as class conflict but rather as an expression of "the desire of many residents for consensus, social peace, and individual autonomy" (p. 120).

Proceeding on to David Mills's chapter on politics, patriotism, religion, and the Cold War, we begin to see better both the shape of the conservative ethos framed by Biolsi and Pehl and the interpretive order folded into the anthology by its editors. Mills recounts the revitalization of religion incident to the Cold War against godless communism, as well as a concomitant surge of patriotism. His account of South Dakotans' heartfelt response to the Freedom Train in 1948 is striking and stirring. Details such as Lieutenant Colonel Joe Foss taking to the air in his fighter plane for a mock defense of Sioux Falls not only add interest to the chapter but almost make the Cold War sound like fun.

Mills's closing observation that "South Dakotans are a conservative people in nearly every aspect of their lives" (p. 146) invites a pause to consider the profile of prairie political culture taking shape in the volume. It is in the Mills essay that the character of the conservatism the anthology's authors all discuss is qualified and defined. It is conservative, but not reactionary. It may articulate at times with the ideological excesses of federal politics, but it is not of them. Rather, in its own way, sometimes beautiful and sometimes bumbling, it expresses real values of prairie people, values to be respected and taken seriously.

The tent the authors and editors thus erect is capacious. No per-

son or belief is to be marginalized. Thus, immediately after David Mills details the importance of religion to the postwar generation, Mark A. Lempke establishes the religious grounding of the public life of George McGovern. This juxtaposition is sublimely effective. By positive portrayal rather than negative refutation, Lempke utterly eradicates any attempt to sketch McGovern as “unrepresentative of South Dakota” (p. 151). McGovern was a goodhearted Wesleyan lad who took a while to find himself but matured into a statesman who “interpreted Christian teaching not as an assurance of personal salvation, but as an urgent call to correct injustice and deprivation on earth” (p. 154)—a sort of prophet, Lempke says. Historically, prophets have a checkered record as to public esteem in their own times and places, but public memory accords them, as it does McGovern, honor in remembrance.

The template established by this point in the discussion also serves well for Sean J. Flynn’s chapter on Ben Reifel. What is to be done, by history and memory, with a German-Sicangu man, an enrolled member of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate, who joined the Republican Party and represented eastern South Dakota in Congress for a decade? One such as Reifel would be easy for an insensitive historian to marginalize, but Flynn is more perceptive than that. “The congressman’s compelling history, his allegiance to the Republican Party, and his message of Native American self-reliance,” Flynn tells us, “conformed ideally to the contours of a state political culture marked by ‘conservative and . . . strong Republican leanings’” (p. 180). Lest we miss the point, we are confronted with the story of Reifel’s birth in a log cabin. Some activists might have called Reifel an “apple” (red on the outside, white on the inside), but unlike his critics, he spoke fluent Lakota, and he brought home real benefits for native communities. Finally, in a heartening conclusion, Flynn writes, “Ben Reifel’s political career dispels the notion that non-Indian South Dakotans will never vote for an Indian” (p. 202).

Steven A. Stofferahn’s chapter on the National Farmers Organization (NFO) in South Dakota shows what one must do to forfeit public sentiment in an inclusively conservative commonwealth: bulldoze a hole in the ground and start shooting livestock in it, or perhaps take potshots at neighbors on the highway. Even in this episode we find grassroots values asserting themselves, philosophically in the commit-

ment to the family farm, materially in the serving of potluck suppers. It's just that the "increasingly controversial tactics" (p. 217) of the NFO, a "wildcat protest movement" (p. 211), made the organization no friends. Salvageable from the misguided excess of NFO leadership are "the hard lessons it imparted to later agrarian activists" (p. 231).

There remains a place in history and memory for consideration of the contributions of individuals, as Tonnis H. Venhuizen shows in his sketch of South Dakota governors. "A few left an indelible mark on South Dakota," Venhuizen adjudges, "while others are nearly forgotten" (p. 242). Difference makers in Venhuizen's catalog include Arthur C. Mellette; Andrew E. Lee; Coe I. Crawford; Peter Norbeck, of course; Tom Berry with his legendary axe; the martyred George S. Mickelson; and William J. Janklow who, in the author's estimation, "defies conventional political labels" (p. 265). He also exemplifies Venhuizen's closing summation: "Though the state's politics have always been conservative, South Dakotans have turned to leaders who take risks, build infrastructure and institutions, and express the state's pragmatic streak through bold action" (p. 270). This catalog of virtues is a good one for historians, as well.

Now is a good time to be a historian, to reflect on the insights harvested from *The Plains Political Tradition*, and to learn from our fellow historians and citizens. This volume makes a notable contribution to an imagined community of a greater Great Plains, a Great Plains deserving of a greater history.⁵ Such is the work that I wake up to every morning and go to sleep contemplating at night. I work toward a history of agency, complexity, and memory, in which individuals and peoples are not mere objects of impersonal forces.⁶ Rather, they think about their lives and make decisions that have consequences. Patterns of meaning should not be imposed upon facts by imperious theory but, rather, ought to be perceived as emergences to be narrated and

5. The reference to "imagined community" invokes the landmark work of Benedict Anderson on the formation of political identity, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

6. Here I reprise themes from my 2012 presidential address to the Western Social Science Association, "Agency, Complexity, Memory: A Scholarship for Western Places," *Social Science Journal* 51 (Spring 2014): 1–5.

explained in terms of interacting peoples, ideas, and forces over time. Great Plains history should make us conscious of what we as a society choose to remember or forget about the past and enable us to come together to forge that imagined community—the only kind of community that matters, that of the imagination—of a greater Great Plains. I join in chorus with Snorri Thorfinnson, agriculturalist and historian, heir of Icelandic saga on the prairies, who wrote and sang:

I love the mountains, I love the hills,
Winding rivers and whispering rills.
But my heart with contentment fills,
Out on the plains I love.
Out on the plains where the wind blows free,
That is the place I am longing to be.
There good fortune will smile on me,
There let me live and die.

On me the city casts no spells.
I hate its noise and assorted smells.
Oh, what relief when my road map tells
I'm on the plains again.
Misty moon in the autumn sky,
Listening to the wild goose cry.
Sometimes I wish that I might fly
Back to Dakota's plains.

Out on the plains where the wind blows free,
That is the place I am longing to be.
There good fortune will smile on me,
There let me live and die.⁷

7. As sung by Grace Bubbers, South Dakota Farmers Union member from Corson County, at the organization's conference in Aberdeen, 11 November 2000.

Picture credits: All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society except for those on the following pages: pp. 191, 196, 209 (bottom), from Sioux-land Heritage Museums, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.; p. 230, from Alexander Mitchell Public Library, Aberdeen, S.Dak.; pp. 246, 252, from John E. Miller, Brookings, S.Dak.; p. 255, from Linda M. Hasselstrom, Hermosa, S.Dak. (photograph by Tamara Rogers); p. 274, from Emma L. Swartz, comp., *History of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Dakota* (Rapid City, S.Dak.: Daily Journal Steam Printing House, 1900).

On the covers: The prohibition of alcohol was a much-debated topic in early twentieth-century South Dakota, generating strong opinions among both “wets” and “drys,” as seen in these postcards distributed by prohibition advocates. In this issue, Chuck Vollan details the campaign to limit alcohol through a constitutional referendum in 1916 as well as the aftermath of voters’ approval of the measure.

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.