

THE KANSAS EXPERIENCE IN POETRY

EDITED BY LORRIN LELAND



**INDEPENDENT STUDY
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INTRODUCTION



THE EXTRA INDUCEMENTS OFFERED TO THOSE WHO WOULD GO WEST AT THE PRESENT TIME.

Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

This anthology is very specialized; it is a collection of poems about Kansas — its history, landscape, people, ideals. Some of the state's best-known poets, like Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, are not included simply because they did not write about Kansas. On the other hand, a few nineteenth-century poets, like Lucy Larcom and John Greenleaf Whittier, wrote about the state without even having visited here.

Why do poets write about Kansas? And why should an anthology of Kansas poems be published? These are legitimate questions for those who think of Kansas in conventional terms like those illustrated in the following passage from Stephen Darst's "How it is playing in Emporia" (*New York Times Magazine*, October 20, 1974):

When outsiders think of Kansas at all they are apt to dust off shopworn images of cow towns before the turn of the century, William Allen White's *Emporia Gazette*, Alf Landon in 1936, or the type of changeless life depicted in the movie "Picnic" with its opening long-shot of mammoth Hutchinson grain elevators looming beside the Santa Fe tracks that stretch endlessly away into an all-pervading flatness, moral, cultural, social, topographical, political.

In the pages of history, the state's image is far from flat and featureless. Kansas has produced an amazing number of radical movements and unconventional public figures, and has often been the center of national attention. With such rich and varied material from history at their disposal, writers have created a large body of literature about Kansas. Poetry in particular has been a favorite genre of those who have written about the state, and the number of published poems that address some aspect of Kansas can be counted in the hundreds.

Many Kansas poems, especially those written before 1900, fail as poetry. This was evident to William H. Carruth, who described the

common faults in his introduction to the two-volume anthology, *Kansas Literature* (1900):

The weaknesses of the majority of Kansas poets are the failure to study faithfully and lovingly life and nature before attempting to present them, and the failure to master thoroughly the art of versifying so as to be in possession of all the requisite verse forms instead of being possessed by some one of them. So many times it has plainly been the case with those who have printed in Kansas that they have simply imbibed at the spring of some one poet until they are filled to overflowing, and then they flow, merely with what they have received.

Carruth's criticism, based as it is on a nineteenth-century aesthetic, is accurate for the poetry of that period. What he fails to consider, however, is the popularity of poetry as a form of expression among sensitive and educated people.

In Carruth's view, it was presumptuous for a Kansas lawyer or farmer or housewife with a rudimentary knowledge of poetic techniques to write and seek to publish poetry. It may be that the results were often artistic monstrosities, but what many of these poems lack in technique they make up for in interesting — occasionally startling — imagery and ideas. Given the state's history (droughts, grasshopper invasions, agrarian unrest) and its landscape (variously described as a stark and barren waste, a beautiful, powerful expanse of rolling land and towering sky, and a man-made agricultural empire), the presence of compelling images and thoughts should come as no surprise.

These images and ideas, as recorded in poetry, make the selections in this anthology worthwhile reading for, as Robert H. Walker notes in *The Poet and the Gilded Age: Social Themes in Late 19th Century American Verse* (1963),

The poets who wrote at that time, although not necessarily exact reporters of events, were important among those who created abstract meanings out of the Western experience. They functioned as chroniclers, as intellectual historians, and as makers and destroyers of myths.

In capturing our nation's intellectual history, the poetry shows how Kansas has shared in the nation's prime concerns since 1854 — the Civil War, the opening of the agricultural West, the growth of industrialism and the waning of economic individualism, the conflict of moral values between traditional regional cultures and a developing national culture, and, most recently, the need to reestablish a connection to the past. These historical forces all contributed to slowly but perceptibly change the accepted perspective on the nature of man, the functions of his institutions, and his relationship to

nature. The poems in this anthology vividly illustrate how these changes have affected the people of Kansas.

In the field of American studies, one basic assumption is that America is worthy of study not simply because of the urge of this nation's people to understand their history and the development of their culture, but because from America's discovery and first settlement, this continent was seen as man's last chance to create a perfect society. Leo Marx describes the aspirations attached to America in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964):

The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination. The reason is clear enough. The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. And now here was a virgin continent! . . . Soon the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society.

The trans-Mississippi West and Kansas in particular were later identified with a similar idealism. A myth about the importance of Kansas to the fate of the nation grew up at the time of the Civil War, and the state was thus singled out for special attention. Made up of New England traditions, Abolitionism, Jeffersonian agrarianism, and a belief in material progress and the possibility of man's perfectibility, the myth was a powerful influence.

In Kansas, most of the predominant ideas and problems of the last half of the nineteenth century focused on the farmer. He was a mythic figure who would transform the West into a vast garden, and so prepare a new land that would be the site of the penultimate flowering of American civilization. Henry Nash Smith, whose *Virgin Land* (1950) is a study of attitudes toward the West, outlines this myth and the farmer's preeminent role in it:

The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society — a collective representation of a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life. The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow.

Just as the farmer was the personification of the myth of the garden in the West (and in Kansas, the first successful agricultural state in the West), he

later came to personify the struggle between individual economic determinism and the huge monopolies that threatened to engulf the American economy. The farmer's battle to earn a decent living and to protect his farm against banks and investment companies that held mortgages on his land and against the railroads and markets that overcharged and underpaid him was a popular subject in Kansas poetry.

While the symbol for the Kansas poets of the last century was the farmer and their main subject the transformation of the prairie into a source of material prosperity, twentieth-century authors have attempted, in their poems, to reconcile art and Kansas life and to find in the land a source of peace and strength. Societal values have changed rapidly in this century, and artists have, perhaps, been the most sensitive to this. They are torn between traditional forms and values and modern concerns, and their poetry often reflects the uncertainties and dislocations inherent in such a conflict.

The poems in this anthology are a chronicle of the development of Kansas and, in many ways, America, since 1854. They are about people, events, places, and ideas. Just as the earlier poems are often antiquated and poorly formed, the more recent poems are almost uniformly excellent. To help place the poems in their historical context, the anthology is divided into five sections, each of which is prefaced by a discussion of the ideas and events important for a full understanding of the poems and the times in which they were written. Some individual poems have explanatory notes as well, and biographical material is provided for many of the poets.

SECTION I

PURITANISM, THE GARDEN,
AND POPULISM

1854-1900

IF YOU WANT A FARM OR HOME
"THE BEST THING IN THE WEST"
Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe
RAILROAD
LANDS
IN SOUTHWEST KANSAS.

Temperate Climate, Excellent Health, Pure and Abundant Water
GOOD SOIL FOR WHEAT, CORN AND FRUIT.
The Best Stock Country in the World

Or to _____ For Full Information apply to
Agent, **LAND COMMISSIONER,**
A. T. & S. F. R. R., Topeka, Kas.

Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

Unusual circumstances surrounded the founding of Kansas territory in 1854, when the first poems about the area were written and published. In that year, the New England Emigrant Aid Company sponsored a contest through a Boston newspaper which offered a prize for a poem that would encourage emigration to the new territory. Among the entries were Lucy Larcom's "A Call to Kansas" (which won the contest) and John Greenleaf Whittier's "The Kansas Emigrant." Both of these poems compare the settling of Kansas to the Pilgrims' settlement of New England. The transplantation of New Englanders to the Kansas prairies would, Larcom and Whittier suggest, inaugurate a new epoch. The struggle between North and South over the issue of slavery was to be decisively settled in Kansas, so that the West would be secured for Yankee farmers rather than southern slavemasters. Eli Thayer, one of the founders of the Emigrant Aid Company, was aware of the importance of Kansas to the future of the nation, as this passage from his *A History of the Kansas Crusade* (1889) clearly shows:

The American is little to be envied who can speak lightly of the decisive contest in Kansas between the two antagonistic civilizations of this continent. Either he does not love his country, or is incapable of understanding her history. In this contest was involved the welfare of the human race more than it had been in any other.

With the defeat of the South in the Civil War, Kansans believed that the moral superiority of the North had been confirmed. Basic to this sense of moral superiority was a feeling that Kansas, guided by the traditions of the Puritans and settled by their progeny, was another New England. A myth grew up about the importance of Puritanism: Henry Brace Norton's "Juanita" and Kate Stephens' "Winds of Delphic Kansas," written almost three decades apart, illustrate the dominance of Puritanism in the image Kansans had of themselves and their state. As late as 1923, William Allen White wrote an essay entitled "Kansas: A Puritan Survival," which gives some indication of the longevity of the myth.

Despite the strength of the belief that Kansas was a "western New England," there seems to be some doubt as to what the so-called Puritan heritage was and exactly how it was manifested in the state. Census figures show that the number of New Englanders in Kansas was small — 3.9% in 1860 at the close of the most active period of the Emigrant Aid Company. However, the influence of these few was evidently considerable, for it led John James Ingalls to assert in his article "Kansas: 1541-1891" that

It is the ideas of the Pilgrims, and not their descendents, that have had dominion in the young commonwealth which resembles primitive Massachusetts.

James C. Malin reexamined the issue some seventy years later in his article "Kansas: Some Reflections on Culture Inheritance and Originality" and found the Puritan myth to be a product of the special climate in Kansas and the nation after the Civil War:

The Civil War, the so-called reconstruction issues that came in its wake, the settlement of Kansas by an unusually large proportion of Union soldiers, the dominance of the Republican party, making Kansas virtually a one-party state, all worked to crystallize thinking along a fairly uniform pattern in which no doubt was entertained about the moral imperative — the North won the war, saved the Union, freed the slave, therefore the North was morally right, and the Republican party claimed the credit, virtually equating the Republican party with the North. In terms of mental conditioning of a whole people, this process was most effectively carried out. The mind of the Kansan, if not committed already to this point of view before coming to Kansas, was thoroughly indoctrinated, not in the facts of this history, but in the legend about history.

Malin then concludes that the type of Puritanism supposedly dominant in early Kansas culture was a conglomeration of attitudes and beliefs that came to be associated with the traditions of New England, but with few true connections to them:

So far as the Civil War legend was involved, with its moral concerns, the influence that had shaped thought was not New England Puritanism in the direct conventional sense, but rather, patriotism cast in the mold of the moral imperative and associated directly with living issues.

The Puritan ideal most manifest in Kansas life, especially in the nineteenth century, was the attitude that life was charged with meaning, and that every conflict was basically a moral question. As a result, many believed that the struggle between abolitionist and proslavery groups in Kansas territory was a case of the forces of light being attacked by the forces of darkness. This tendency to view life symbolically can be noted in

the writing about Kansas from the last century. Stephens' "Winds of Delphic Kansas" and Ingalls' statement in his essay "Kansas" (1896) that "Kansas is indispensable to the joy, the inspiration, and the improvement of the world" both contain the self-righteous tone and the implied Manichean world view characteristic of the Puritan tradition in the state. Later manifestations of this tradition include the temperance and prohibition movements. Of course, to say that Puritanism is wholly responsible for those movements is to exaggerate its influence and to oversimplify the causes of social and political change.

The other popular conception of the nineteenth century that had an effect on Kansas poetry was the myth of the garden. As mentioned in the introduction, this myth can be traced back to the discovery and initial settlement of America; in a somewhat altered form, it was most potent when applied to the trans-Mississippi West. The prairies of Kansas seemed destined to be bent to the uses of man, and the rich harvests wrested from them would provide the economic basis for the achievement of the final stage of American culture. To those enthralled by the vision of the garden, even the climate could be controlled by simply bringing the implements of civilization to the prairies, or so this paragraph from an article in *The Kansas Monthly* (January 1881) states:

The sudden release of the accumulated energy so long imprisoned in the useless soil, the prodigious store of electricity in the atmosphere, and the resentment which Nature always exhibits at the invasion of her solitudes, all contributed to induce a social disorder as intemperate as their own. But an improvement in our physical conditions is already perceptible. The introduction of the metals in domestic and agricultural implements, jewelry, railroads and telegraphs, has to a great extent restored the equilibrium, and by constantly conducting electricity to the earth, prevents local congestion and a recurrence of the tempests and tornados of early days. The rains which were wont to run from the trampled pavement of sod suddenly into the streams, are now absorbed into the cultivated soil and gradually restored to the air by solar evaporation, making the alteration of the seasons less violent, and continued droughts less probable.

The vision of the garden led some poets to eagerly anticipate a golden age in Kansas comparable to that of ancient Athens, and to begin writing epics about Kansas. Two prime examples are Thomas Brower Peacock's "The Rhyme of the Border War" (1889) and Joel Moody's "The Song of Kansas" (1890). Both poems are long, of uneven quality, and seem artificial; neither accomplishes its aim, which was evidently to do for Kansas what *The Faerie Queene* did for Elizabethan England — connect the present and the immediate past to the myths of earlier times and thereby make the history of Western civilization an unbroken progression.

At the time that Moody, Peacock, and others were composing their historic epics, farmers were finding it difficult to retain any belief in the vision of the garden. A combination of bad weather, invasions of insects, and falling prices caused a feeling of frustration that ultimately led to the creation of the Populist party. Few poets took the farmer's plight seriously, and those who did, like Celeste May, still felt obligated to provide for a happy future in their poems. Even fewer poets took up the Populist banner. Most of them, like Joel Moody, were lawyers or businessmen who believed in the Republican party and saw the new party as a threat to be stifled rather than as a cause to be celebrated in verse. One exception was Sol L. Long, who wrote scathing attacks on those he thought were the enemies of the honest farmer — capitalists and the two established parties, especially the Republicans. Neither Long, who continued to write into this century about the betrayal of the simple husbandman, nor the Populist party, which lost its support when prices and the weather again became favorable, had a lasting effect on Kansas poetry.

It should be pointed out that this period was difficult for those who came to Kansas. The conflict over the issue of slavery was only one of the problems that confronted the pioneers; perhaps even more important was the unsettling effect that the land itself caused. As James C. Malin, Walter Prescott Webb, and others have shown, the prairie was a new environment where old ways would not always suffice. In "Kansas Historiography: The Technique of Cultural Analysis" (*American Quarterly*, Spring 1957), Roy F. Nichols summarizes Malin's conclusions on the innovations that were necessary:

He (Malin) indicates that the history of Kansas as it develops as a state is but a continuation of the process of adaptation of men originally conditioned to a forest, corn culture depending on water transportation and communication as they cope with the grasslands, as they substitute minerals for wood, as they develop the cattle industry, as they introduce winter wheat as a principal crop, as they turn to railroads, as they contrive machinery and as they build cities to be centers of rail rather than water transportation.

Considering the disorienting effect such radical changes can produce, it should be no surprise that Kansans sought solace in abstract concepts like the Puritan tradition and the myth of the garden; these beliefs formed a link to the comfortable past, the old ways.

As "A Call to Kansas" shows, Larcom had not visited Kansas prior to that poem's composition. Her interest in Kansas was a result of her identification with the traditions of her native New England. Her autobiography, *A New England Girlhood*, is her best known work.

A CALL TO KANSAS

Yeomen strong, hither throng!

Nature's honest men;

We will make the wilderness

Bud and bloom again.

Bring the sickle, speed the plow,

Turn the ready soil!

Freedom is the noblest pay

For the true man's toil.

Ho, brothers! come, brothers!

Hasten all with me;

We'll sing upon the Kansas plains

A song of liberty.

Father, haste! O'er the waste

Lies a pleasant land.

There your fireside's altar-stones,

Fixed in truth, shall stand.

There your sons, brave and good,

Shall to freemen grow,

Clad in triple mail of right,

Wrong to overthrow.

Ho, brothers! come, brothers!

Hasten all with me;

We'll sing upon the Kansas plains

A song of liberty!

Mother, come! Here's a home

In the waiting West;

Bring the seeds of love and peace,

You who sow them best.

Faithful hearts, holy prayers,
Keep from taint the air;
Soil a mother's tears have wet
Golden crops shall bear.
Come, mother! fond mother,
List, we call to thee;
We'll sing upon the Kansas plains
A song of liberty!

Brother brave, stem the wave!
Firm the prairies tread!
Up the dark Missouri flood
Be your canvas spread.
Sister true, join us too,
Where the Kansas flows;
Let the Northern lily bloom
With the Southern rose.
Brave brother! True sister!
List, we call to thee;
We'll sing upon the Kansas plains
A song of liberty!

Lays of the Emigrants (1855).

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER (1807-1885) b. Haverhill, Mass.

Whittier, one of the most respected American poets in the last century, wrote several poems about Kansas during the troubled times following the organization of the territory. "The Kansas Emigrant" differs from his other Kansas poems in that it is not a scathing attack on the proslavery forces in the state. Probably because it was written specifically as an entry for the contest sponsored by the New England Emigrant Aid Company, it is a vision of what Kansas could be if settled by New Englanders. For his other Kansas poems, see *The Writings of John Greenleaf Whittier (1888)*.

THE SONG OF THE KANSAS EMIGRANT

We cross the prairies as of old
The Pilgrims crossed the sea,
To make the West, as they the East,
The homestead of the free.

CHORUS

The homestead of the free, my boys,
The homestead of the free,
To make the West, as they the East,
The homestead of the free.

We go to rear a wall of men
On Freedom's Southern line,
And plant beside the cotton-tree
The rugged Northern pine.

We're flowing from our native hills,
As our free rivers flow;
The blessings of our mother-land
Are on us as we go.

We go to plant her common schools
On distant prairie swells,
And give the Sabbaths of the wild
The music of her bells.

Upbearing, like the ark of old,
The Bible in her van,
We go to test the truth of God
Against the fraud of man.

No pause, nor rest, save where the streams
That feed the Kansas run,
Save where our pilgrim gonfalon
Shall flout the setting sun.

We'll tread the prairies as of old
Our fathers sailed the sea;
And make the West, as they the East,
The homestead of the free.

Norton came to Kansas to assume the duties of vice-principal at the state normal school in Emporia. He was one of the founders of Arkansas City and served as editor of one issue of the *Kansas Magazine*, the issue in which "Juanita, An Idyl of the Plains" appeared. "Juanita" is a long poem (395 lines) about the love of Juanita Brown, who is of Spanish and New England ancestry, and Quincy Bradstreet, a European-educated Massachusetts man who is a scientist and lawyer as well as a man of action. Juanita's renegade cousin, Don Castro, also loves her, and with the help of a band of Kiowas, attacks the wagon train she and Quincy are travelling in. Despite Quincy's valiant efforts, only a counterattack by the friendly Wah-sash tribe saves the couple. Don Castro, disguised as an Indian, is killed by Caunah, the chief of the Wah-sash. "Juanita" epitomizes a particular type of western romance familiar to the readers of Zane Grey. Norton closes his poem with these lines:

From telling this story, pray excuse
My sunburnt, hoydenish Border Muse!
She better loves to scent the gale
In a gallop fierce on the bison's trail,
And she leaps to the back of her wild mustang,
And is off a-whoop with clatter and clang!

In a note following the poem, Norton claims the story of "Juanita" was "very closely paralleled" by actual events in Kansas in the summer of 1872.

From
JUANITA: AN IDYL OF THE PLAINS

Tableau:--a yellow, crawling flood,
Pouring out from the buffalo plains;
Thick with a ropy, slimy mud;
Swoln and frothing with recent rains.
Sand-banks fringe it; scanty ranks
Of gawkish cottonwoods shade the banks.
Its tortuous channels wind and twist
Through an aguish ocean of morning mist.
From the low north bank to the southern ridge
Runs a patent, brand-new, pile-built bridge.

Through thickets of elm and plum we pass
To broad savannas of cane-like grass,
Fit for the old-time mammoth's jaw;
Such a stream is the Arkansas.

North a mile, on a swelling down,
Stands a fussy, half-fledged border town.
Gaudily-colored sign-boards shine
On the new-built fronts of paintless pine;
Cottonwood shanties, warped and lank,
With log-walled cabins stand in rank.

A "Third-class City" by Kansas code;-

A fitting home for the Western Muse;
Yet the Saxon spirit hath found abode
In this petty town, with its shops and slews.

'T is said that money shall yet be made
From Texas herds, and the Indian trade;
By cutting marble and brewing malt;
By mining gypsum, cement, and salt;
And daily the streets are all alive
With sharp-eyed swarms from the Yankee hive.

Down by the river-bank, a park
Of wagons, clumsy as Noah's Ark,
Each one filled with a mighty weight
Of soldiers' rations and traders' freight.
O'er all is the veil of darkness drawn
Tenderly fringed with the morning dawn.
In the growing light the dew-drops shine;
Can you see the picture, reader mine?

Kansas Magazine (June 1873).

A University of Kansas graduate, Stephens taught Greek at her alma mater from 1878 until 1885. She wrote often about life in Lawrence and at the University, and also produced a biography of her father, a prominent Kansas judge. Her most interesting work may be *The Lies and Libels of Frank Harris*, a reply to the sections of Frank Harris' autobiography *My Life and Loves* (1925), which deal with her fiance Byron Caldwell Smith. "Winds of Delphic Kansas" shows Stephens' background in classical literature and strong evidence of her belief in the Puritan myth.

WINDS OF DELPHIC KANSAS

Half-west, half-east; half-north, half-south;
--As in Grecian Delphi in days of old,
The center of the world as men then told--
The winds blow ever--and through a god's mouth.

O, the snow-footed, ice-armored winds of the prairie,
 Rushing out mightily
From cosmic caves of the north,
From glacier forces of earth and air,
 The winter winds of the prairie!
They drive dark clouds from morn to morn,
They shake the light o'er stubbles of corn,
They whistle through woods of leaves all shorn,
With never a hint of the spring to be born,
 The flesh-freezing winds of the prairie!

Half-north, half-south; half-east, half-west;
The air pours ever; the winds never rest.

O the sun-lifted, cotton-soft winds of the prairie,
 Cheering right merrily
From tillage lands of the south,
From warmth of breeding southern seas,
 The June-sweet winds of the prairie!

They drive silver clouds all day to its close,
And shake glowing light on young corn in rows,
They rock the trees till the small birds drowse,
They swirl the fragrance of wild-grape and rose,
The seminal winds of the prairie.

Half-south, half-north; half-west, half-east;
A people intoxicate: and the winds do not cease.

O the free-state, Puritan-spirited winds of the prairie,
Singing right heartily

That gods were but folk who were free,
The folk who are free are as gods,

The human-voiced winds of the prairie!

They call Brown of bloody-blade from Osawatomie,

They smite swift the shackles--the slave is free;

To all the world they say in their humanity

'Come here and build a home loyal to me,'

The primal-souled winds of the prairie!

Half-east, half-west; half-south, half-north;

All forces here meet, but the free alone are worth;

O the self-reliant, right-seeking winds of the prairie!

Blowing out lustily

From the race-brood of New England

In this western New England,

The altruistic, rainbow-future winds of the prairie!

They strive ever after the ideal--Better! Better!

Till today they sing 'Melior! Brook no fetter!

Of freedom the spirit seek ye; not the letter!

Melior! Melior! Better! Better!

The cloud-dispelling, star-climbing winds of the prairie!

So, prophetic in zeal, through hot winds and cold,

--As in Grecian Delphi in days of old,

The center of the world as men then told--

Half-west, half-east; half-north, half-south--

The spirit speaks ever--and through a god's mouth.

Sunflowers (1914).

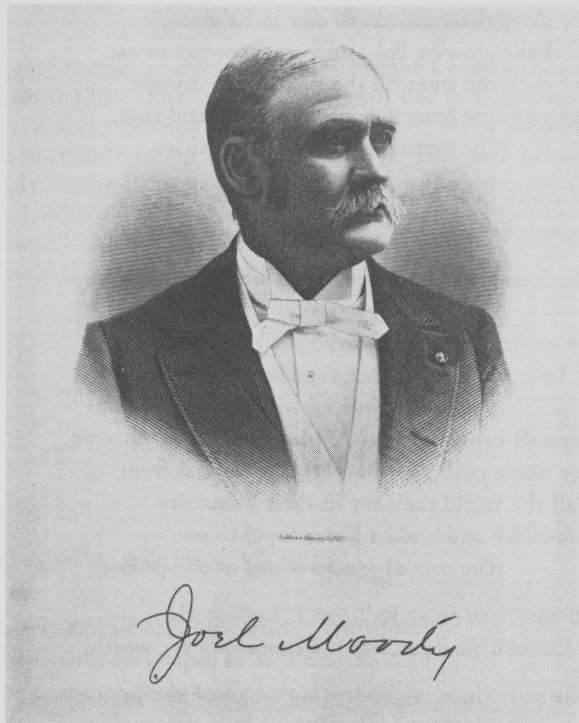


Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

JOEL MOODY (1838-1914) b. Frederickstown, Canada

Moody came to Kansas in 1860 after completing his education at Oberlin and the University of Michigan. He served as a captain in the Union army during the Civil War, and then returned to Kansas to begin a dual career in journalism and law. Eventually he moved into politics and was elected to public office four times. Like his contemporary, Eugene Ware, Moody took an interest in a wide range of subjects. He was interested in philosophy and religion and wrote *The Science of Evil, or First Principles of Human Action* in 1871. During the controversy over the proposed adoption of the silver standard — which was advocated by the Populist party — Moody supported the gold standard in his pamphlet *The First Principles of Money* (1892). Moody's "Song of Kansas" is not, however, similar to Ware's *Rhymes of Ironquill*. Moody chose to write in an epic style and to deal almost exclusively with the events of Kansas history (especially the territorial period), whereas Ware wrote on many subjects and employed a less ornate style. "The Song of Kansas" was an ambitious undertaking by an active, intelligent, and literate man, but it fails primarily because of Moody's inappropriate use of the machinery of classic mythology.

From
THE SONG OF KANSAS

Liberty and John Brown

Then Liberty, who long had wept
O'er crimes committed in her name,
Took her sad flight from halls where Fame
Had blazoned forth her deeds, and came
On sable wing of Night, where kept

Her sacred watch-fire burning bright
On Kansas soil, the great John Brown.
Him she found; — not in busy town,
Or soft on easy couch lain down;
But on the grassy plain, where Night

With scent of flower and gentle dew
Refreshed, — him sad and lowly bent
In fervent prayer, and turbulent
Unrest she found; — then flashing sent
O'er him her radiant light, and threw

Her armor down, and thus began:
"Great friend of man and liberty,
My name and cause shall honored be
In this broad land from sea to sea;
Soon shall Slavery's course be run.

"But ere that time, a mighty hand,
Well worthy of the Titan race
Must here be raised, and in the face
Of Treason break the lance, and chase
Its furies howling from the land.

"Here in the shade of sacred Night,
With all her stars and heavenly train
Of worshipers who brightly reign
On high to note, thy soul I chain
To my great cause, and give thee sight

"And holy light to see divine.
On thee now falls the blessed ray
Which gilds my shield, and naught shall stay
My onward march, until the day
I love shall here in glory shine.

“Thee have I called, like John of old,
Who the dear Savior’s course forerun, —
And thee baptize my holy son,
With fire, in name of Holy One.
Now here within my hand I hold

“What the great John of Patmos said
Should be in time outpoured on earth, —
Vials of wrath; — their deadly worth
Is needed now, — for fierce from birth
The serpent old holds high his head.

“Into this vial now I put the tears,
Which loving wives and children shed
In Kansas, o’er their murdered dead.
Here is a lock of hair from head
Of Sumner, with fresh blood it bears; —

“Here is the blood of murdered Dow,
Barber, Brown, Jones, and Stewart
brave;
Five sons of mine now in their grave, —
This pang their passing spirits gave
And cried in woe: ‘Make Treason bow!’

“Here is the anguish of their hearts
Which through my drooping spirit runs; —
Here are the groans these dying sons
Have left, and prayers for darling ones,
And kiss while ebbing life departs; —

“Here the torn flesh and bloody scars,
And damning insult Phillips stood; —
From Butler’s craft a piece of wood; —
Here is a drop of virgin blood
Ravished by fiends beneath my stars; —

“The ashes here of Lawrence, — there
The type of press, the drunken glee, —
The dust from trail of Treason see; —
Here is the bullet shot at me,
And here the slimy serpent’s glare.

“These ‘Bogus’ votes you see were cast
By ruffian hordes, and these their rags; —
Here the ruffian words on flags; —
Here the hoarse laugh while Justice lags,
And here the ‘Bogus Laws’ at last.

“All these into this vial go!
Now soak, and shake, and let distill.
Behold another one I fill!
Here from the sword of Bunker Hill
Drops the base blood of foreign foe; —

“Here is the sigh which Warren gave,
As his sweet spirit passed on high; —
Here the keen glance of Putnam’s eye; —
Here Franklin’s thought; and here the cry
Of Henry: ‘Freedom or the grave!’

“Here the patriot pen of Paine,
And here the deeds of Washington; —
Here are his battles lost and won;
And here the dust of every son
Of mine who in that cause was slain; —

“Here the swift shaft which Jackson sent
Full at the front of Treason; — here
The hot words which Tallmadge, dear
And grand to every freeman’s ear,
Hurled back at Cobb, and fatal went.

“This is enough. This vial keep;
For you will need the lighter drink
When Death shall take you home; nor sink
Beneath the awful thought; nor think
The draught not good; for your last sleep

“Shall come and pass in awful form;
And you shall heave the broken sigh,
And grandly on the scaffold die, —
Then with the patriots you shall lie,
Unmindful of the passing storm.

“But here, this darker drink now quaff!”
This then she handed him, and Brown
Arose and said: “The thorny crown
I wear, nor do I seek renown, —
The stormy path I tread, thy staff

“Supports me now;” —and then he drank.
This now infused all fear forsook,
And all his vital spirits shook.
Then opened he the Holy Book,
And said: “Great Author, Thee I thank

“For counsels in my hour of need:
‘An eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,’
This is no fond, no gentle ruth,
No smooth, gilt-edged or varnished truth —
Within this book I find my creed;

“Its counsels wise shall guide my feet.
’Tis written here in holy word:
‘Christ came not peace to bring, but sword, —
To Him I bow, as my great Lord.
His truth is ample and complete.”

This said, the goddess took her flight,
And back on sable wing she sped,
With flashing halo round her head, —
By fair Columbia’s hand was led
Through all the glittering train of Night.

The Song of Kansas and Other Poems (1890).

Peacock was primarily an inventor (he held several patents), but he had literary aspirations as well, and wrote poetry and plays. He was selected to read his "Columbian Ode" at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1892. His "The Rhyme of the Border War," a long poem about the "bleeding Kansas" period, is written in an epic style, and the characterization of William Quantrill is based on Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Peacock sent copies of his books to Matthew Arnold, the famed English author, and received polite but noncommittal notes in return. Somehow Peacock interpreted Arnold's terse communications as praise and so had them reproduced in facsimile in *Poems of the Plains and Songs of the Solitudes* (1889).

From

THE RHYME OF THE BORDER WAR

Yet Quantrell, with a conscience keen,
Felt if he could he'd rather been
A soldier on the Northern side;
But fate and vengeance this denied.
All through the war his thoughts upbraid
That he lived on a renegade —
As when, by God from home and Heaven
Ambitious Satan, distant driven,
Far onward solitary went,
And far through space his journey bent,
With thoughts full bitter with defeat,
And a remorse pride could not cheat,
That he had with his Father warred,
And with his brother, Christ, our Lord, —
Though swift through dread immensity
He flies the boundless, bottomless sea —
O'er frozen, over fiery worlds,
Past burning meteor as it hurls,
Expecting to some realm obtain,
Where he might e'er unrivalled reign; —
Though Quantrell thus unhappy, he
Kept hidden all his misery;
Provoked to vengeance, his loved slain,
A Nemesis he roamed the plain.

Poems of the Plains and Sagas of the Solitudes (1889).

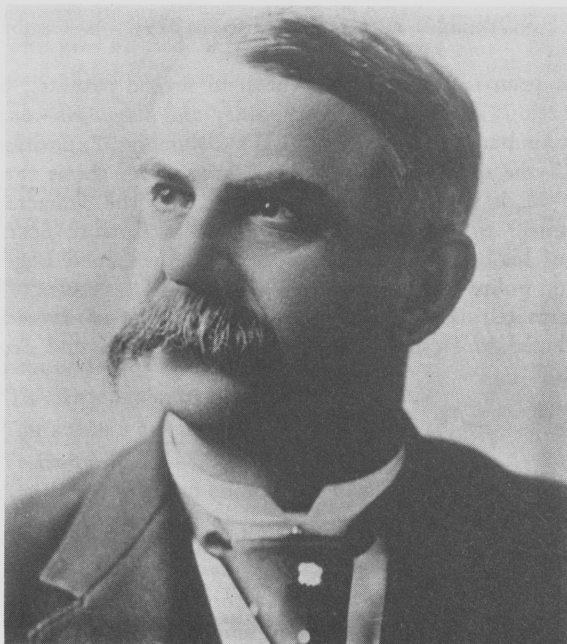


Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

EUGENE FITCH WARE (1848-1911) b. Hartford, Conn.

Ware, whose pennames were "Ironquill" and "the Philosopher from Paint Creek," came to Kansas after serving in the Union Army and editing an Iowa newspaper. He settled at Fort Scott, studied law, and later became a specialist in the fields of water rights and insurance law. Although Ware wrote several books on a wide number of subjects — military history, water rights law, even a Latin translation — his literary reputation rests upon his collection of poetry, *Rhymes of Ironquill*, which was revised and went through many editions. Ware first gained attention with "The Washerwoman's Song," which aroused a public furor because of its supposed atheism. Ware's Kansas poems earned him the unofficial title of the state's poet laureate, and he was favorably compared to James Whitcomb Riley, the well-known Indiana poet of the same period. "John Brown" and "Quivera-Kansas" are probably Ware's best-known Kansas poems, but *The Kansas Bandit, or The Fall of Ingalls* (1891), a privately published verse play that lampoons the Populists, may be his most entertaining work. Ware was undoubtedly the most widely read Kansas poet of the last century, and his influence on the state's poetry was considerable. Modern readers often find Ware's poetry out-dated and difficult to approach; Kenneth Irby, for example, describes it as "flapdoodle jingo verse." An excellent study of Ware as poet, thinker, lawyer, politician, and man is James C. Malin's *Ironquill-Paint Creek Essays* (1972).

In that half-forgotten era,
 With the avarice of old,
 Seeking cities he was told
 Had been paved with yellow gold,
In the kingdom of Quivera —

Came the restless Coronado
 To the open Kansas plain,
 With his knights from sunny Spain;
 In an effort that, though vain,
Thrilled with boldness and bravado.

League by league, in aimless marching,
 Knowing scarcely where or why,
 Crossed they uplands drear and dry,
 That an unprotected sky
Had for centuries been parching.

But their expectations eager,
 Found, instead of fruitful lands,
 Shallow streams and shifting sands,
 Where the buffalo in bands
Roamed o'er deserts dry and meager.

Back to scenes more trite, yet tragic,
 Marched the knights with armor'd steeds;
 Not for them the quiet deeds;
 Not for them to sow the seeds
From which empires grow like magic.

Never land so hunger-stricken
 Could a Latin race re-mold;
 They could conquer heat or cold —
 Die for glory or for gold —
But not make a desert quicken.

Thus Quivera was forsaken;
 And the world forgot the place
 Through the lapse of time and space.
 Then the blue-eyed Saxon race
Came and bade the desert waken.

And it bade the climate vary;
And awaiting no reply
From the elements on high,
It with plows besieged the sky —
Vexed the heavens with the prairie.

Then the vitreous sky relented,
And the unacquainted rain
Fell upon the thirsty plain,
Where had gone the knights of Spain,
Disappointed, discontented.

Sturdy are the Saxon faces,
As they move along in line;
Bright the rolling-cutters shine,
Charging up the State's incline,
As an army storms a glaxis.

Into loam the sand is melted,
And the blue-grass takes the loam,
Round about the prairie home;
And the locomotives roam
Over landscapes iron-belted.

Cities grow where stunted birches
Hugged the shallow water-line;
And the deepening rivers twine
Past the factory and mine,
Orchard slopes and schools and churches.

Deeper grows the soil and truer,
More and more the prairie teems
With a fruitage as of dreams;
Clearer, deeper, flow the streams,
Blander grows the sky and bluer.

We have made the State of Kansas,
And to-day she stands complete —
First in freedom, first in wheat;
And her future years will meet
Ripened hopes and richer stanzas.

Selections from Ironquill (1899).

THE KANSAS DUG-OUT

Peering from a Kansas hill side, far away,
Is a cabin made of sod, and built to stay;
 Through the window-like embrasure
 Pours the mingled gold and azure
Of the morning of a gorgeous Kansas day.

Blue-eyed children round the cabin chase the day;
They are learning life's best lesson — how to stay,
 To be tireless and resistful;
 And the antelope look wistful
And they want to join the children in their play.

Fortune-wrecked, the parents sought the open West,
Leaving happy homes and friends they loved the best;
 Homes in cities bright and busy
 That responded to the dizzy,
To the whirling and tumultous unrest.

Oft it happens unto families and men
That they need must touch their mother earth again;
 Rising, rugged and reliant,
 Like Antaeus, the old giant,
Then they dare and do great things — and not till then.

As around his neck the arms of children twine,
Says the father: "Courage, children, never pine;
 Though the skies around you blacken,
 Do not yield — the gales will slacken,
Faith and fortitude will win, O children mine."

Selections from Ironquill (1899).

End of Nov. and Autumn. 1857.
la fin de Novembre, l'an 1857. S.J.R.

12.8.7.



" Old Brown."
" John Brown."
" Conwatomie Brown."
" He'll trouble them
most, when his
Coffin's nailed
Down! "

Old John Brown.

SAMUEL J. READER, Drawn May 1860.

Sketch of John Brown from the journal of Samuel J. Reader.
Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

States are not great
Except as men may make them;
Men are not great except they do and dare.
But States, like men,
Have destinies that take them —
That bear them on, not knowing why or where.

The WHY repels
The philosophic searcher —
The WHY and WHERE all questionings defy,
Until we find,
Far back in youthful nurture,
Prophetic facts that constitute the WHY.

All merit comes
From braving the unequal;
All glory comes from daring to begin.
Fame loves the State
That, reckless of the sequel,
Fights long and well, whether it lose or win.

Than in our State
No illustration apter
Is seen or found of faith and hope and will.
Take up her story:
Every leaf and chapter
Contains a record that conveys a thrill.

And there is one
Whose faith, whose fight, whose failing,
Fame shall placard upon the walls of time.
He dared begin —
Despite the unavailing,
He dared begin, when failure was a crime.

When over Africa
Some future cycle
Shall sweep the lake-gemmed uplands with its surge;
When, as with trumpet
Of Archangel Michael,
Culture shall bid a colored race emerge;

When busy cities
There, in constellations,
Shall gleam with spires and palaces and domes,
With marts wherein
Is heard the noise of nations;
With summer groves surrounding stately homes —

There, future orators
To cultured freemen
Shall tell of valor, and recount with praise
Stories of Kansas,
And of Lacedaemon —
Cradles of freedom, then of ancient days.

From boulevards
O'erlooking both Nyanzas,
The statured bronze shall glitter in the sun,
With rugged lettering:

**“JOHN BROWN OF KANSAS:
HE DARED BEGIN;
HE LOST,
BUT, LOSING, WON.”**

Selections from Ironquill (1899).

THE DROUGHT

The sun beat hot upon the withered grass,
 That crackled under foot like molten glass;
 And there was heard
 No note or call of bird;
 Instead of cooling zephyrs' breath,
 The southwest simoon brought but death.

Instead of gentle showers, there,
 A white heat on the earth did glare,
 And vegetation, brown and bare
 Brought forth no food
 For man, or beast, or bird;
 And all about was heard
 A cry of desolation.
 The streams were dry.
 Above, the clear and pitiless sky
 Shone, steady and bright,
 From its dazzling height.
 The birds had fled —
 The fish were dead.
 Each morning, filled with dread,
 Unrested from the night,
 The inhabitants awoke and fed
 Upon their scanty bread.
 And watched, with longing eyes
 And vain expectancy, the skies;
 And fain would stand
 Watching a cloud no larger than the prophet's hand;
 But not with equal faith that it would bring
 From the dry heavens the longed-for rain.

Sometimes, gigantic size the clouds attained,
 Yet all their life-giving bulk retained,
 Till far beyond our burning sand,
 They reached a happier-fated land,
 And there unburdened, in kissing showers,
 Upon laden fields, and fruit and flowers.

Beautiful lakes, in mirage, oft were seen,
In tantalizing vision; and the green
Of tall trees growing close beside,
And cities mirrored in fictitious tide;
Making the people feel like they were stranded
Upon Sahara's desert, empty handed.

Oh, would it never rain!
And ease the burning pain
Of the scorched earth,
And quench this awful dearth!
Would there never again come dew,
Fainting nature to renew!

Must they abandon their prairie home,
For the antelope and buffalo again to roam,
Owners of all. They had thought it grand,
This smoothly-lying prairie land,
And had planned what beautiful homes they'd make,
And how much comfort and ease they would take.

Now, the bustle and stir of ambition all hushed,
Through the quiet and desolation rushed
Visions of once happy homes;
And ever and again there comes,
To overstrained and weary heart,
The longing to return; and so depart

Many, to their former home —
Glad to be gone — yet leaving some,
Who could not go,
To suffer, slow
And bitter pangs of hard privation,
Amounting almost to starvation.
But they struggled bravely on,
Conquering hardships, one by one,
Until, inured to suffering and want,
Nothing could their spirits daunt.

Sounds of the Prairies (1886).

THE RAIN

After months of weary waiting —
Months of heartache and of anguish —
Months of hoping and of praying
That all nature might not languish,
Came the blessed rain, in torrents,
Kissing the parched earth, and cooling.
All the moisture held in durance
For those long months, seemed outpouring —

On the fields and plains so arid,
And the long-expectant people;
On the dry and dusty high road,
Came the blessed rain, so needful;
Filling full the creeks and rivers,
And the little streamlets glad'ning;
Filling full the gaping fissures
In the dry earth, open standing.

Soon again the grass was green,
Soon were heard the sweet birds singing;
Here and there, there soon were seen
Ploughmen with glad hearts returning:
Once again the fine, rich soil,
Moistened by refreshing showers,
Yields its fruitage unto toil;
And the prairies blaze with flowers.

With thankful hearts and steady hand,
People began to improve their homes;
Determined again to reclaim the land
From the wild herd which upon it roams.
Cottages neat, and pastures wide,
Flowering gardens and stone walls grand,
Young orchards and fields on every side,
Pictures of comfort and thrift, now stand.

Sounds of the Prairies (1886).

Long, a resident of Arkansas City and Winfield, was involved in the Populist movement. Like many radicals of the period, he had experience as a lawyer and journalist as well as a background in farming. Long wrote many poems which were set to the popular tunes of the 1890s and intended to be used as campaign songs. His later poetry like "What Profit?" (1908) shows the bitterness with which many Populists viewed the failure of the people to understand and support the aims of their party.

HOW I LOST MY FARM

Tune — *Billy Barnes from Norville Town*

Come brethen I will tell you
So you may understand,
Just how it come about that I
Have lost my Kansas land.

I put a mortgage on my farm
Way back in eighty-two;
And if the bankers had let up,
I could have worried through.

But prices for the things I raised
Kept lowering all the time;
And for the things I had to buy
Kept always on the climb.

The party bosses told me if
I'd vote the ticket straight,
That times would surely brighten up
And I would strike my gait.

I followed blindly their advice
And done just as they said;
But that infernal mortgage
Kept a daylight length ahead.

And for some reason soon I found
I did not get along,
And wakened up unto the fact
That there was something wrong.

I knew that I'd worked hard and long,
Lived economically,
So I was more than doubly sure,
The fault was not in me.

I got to reading then and found
Both parties far had strayed,
From freedom and we by their tools
Had often been betrayed.

And though I raise more corn and wheat
And cattle, than of old,
They do not bring much more than half
The money when they're sold.

And that's the reason why my farm,
Along with others, went
Unto the mortgage company,
And why I am forced to rent.

If I vote with old parties now,
Will some one be so kind,
As to send me to some safe retreat
For men of feeble mind.

People's Campaign Songster (1890).

KANSAS DOODLE

Tune — *Yankee Doodle*

When I went down to Washington
Along with Captain Pebbles;
I found our Caustic Johnny J.
Quite busy skinning rebels.

I took him by the hand, and said
Ah! John you wily charmer,
Please tell me what you've ever done
To benefit the farmer?

Why, for their benefit said he
I've speaking, fame been winning,
And for their benefit also,
The rebels I've been skinning.

And that you Kansas people might
Thrive much and live in Clover,
I've stood upon the Senate floor
And fought the war all over.

And too I've drew my salary,
A duty mighty pleasing,
For eighteen long and golden years
Both regular and unceasing.

And while you've fooled away your time,
At raising corn and cattle,
Over some parliamentary rule
I've fought a wordy battle.

I've labored hard and faithfully
At plutocrats behest sir,
And half a score of farmers bills
Introduced by request, sir.

I've called the previous question up
And told full many a story,
About our noble state, and too
Have covered her with glory.

Now I would like to know said he
What move you folks are wanting,
And why so many Kansans are
The Senate galleries haunting.

I answered though you have been told
I'll tell again the story,
We want more money Johnny dear,
And not so much of glory.

John you are tired, hard you've worked
For Wall Street not the nation,
So next November John you'll get
An eternal vacation.

Peoples Campaign Songster (1890).

Judge

ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK AS SECOND-CLASS MATTER. COPYRIGHT 1891 BY THE JUDGE PUBLISHING CO.



HOW HAS THE MIGHTY FALLEN!

INGALLS—"Shine, sir? Carry your bag? I'll do anything to please you NOW, sir!"

Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

The above cartoon refers to the decision of the Populist-dominated 1890 Kansas legislature to not return John James Ingalls to the U.S. Senate.

WHAT PROFIT?

They have cut the plains in a thousand fields
And parcelled them out among
The brood who love the clang of steel
And the sound of a brazen tongue;
The ones by whom a flower's perfume
Is flouted and scorned and spurned;
Whose nostrils can only sense the reek
Of the earth; when a furrow is turned.

They have given to them a parchment power;
By which they may have and hold
The right to follow a plow in peace,
Until they are bent and old;
The right to rest in a fetid room,
Shut in from the arching sky;
To say to their fellow: "All this is mine;
By the power —", of a printed lie!

They will lock the door of their empty souls
And lean on the things outside,
And gladly walk in the way of pain
If the ones who praise may ride!
They will wear the shackles of class and caste;
Of their acres; their herds; their flocks;
If they may ride to the grave in state
And sleep in a polished box.

They will trade the strength of their manhood's years
And barter their womanhood,
For a cup of gall, from a velvet hand,
If they be but told: "'Tis good."
They will pour their sweat at Mammon's shrine
And give him their flesh and blood,
And rail at the Hindoo mother who flings
Her child to the Ganges' flood.

They have cut the plains in a thousand fields —
But where does the profit lie
If wealth increase a thousand fold
And mind and manhood die?
What profit to earth; or what to man,
Is there in a thousand fields,
If the opiate and the gear of a slave
Are all that the thousand yields?

SECTION II

DESERT AND BREADBASKET

1900-1925

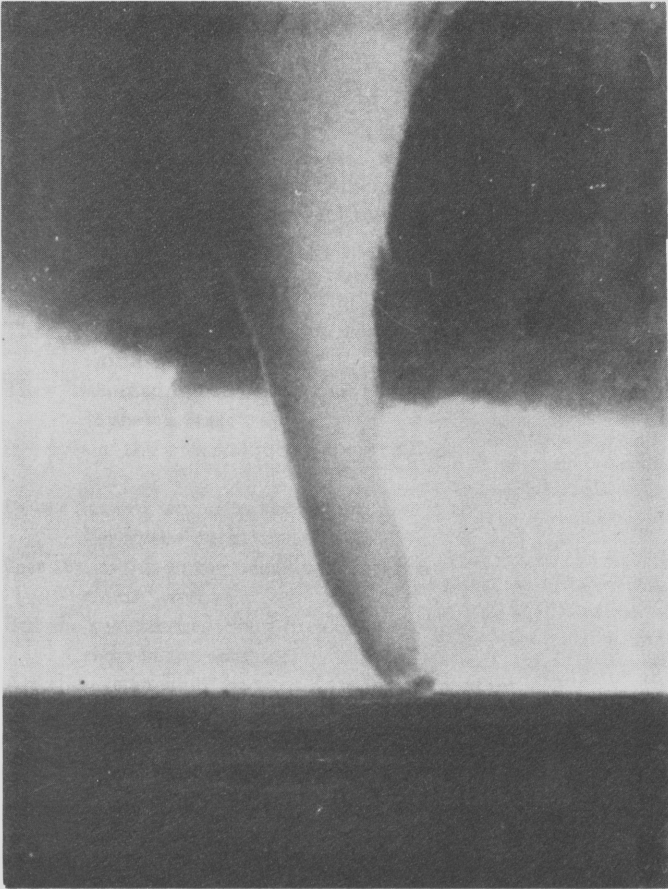


Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

The turn of the century brought new concerns to Kansas. The agrarian problems that found political expression in the Populist party were no longer of immediate concern. Kansas was making great strides forward and leaving its image of disaster and radicalism behind, as these lines from a poem by James Barton Adams in the June 23, 1901 *Topeka Capitol* show:

They're sneakin' back to Kansas, reps and dem,
prohibs and pops:
They have heard the wondrous story of the
world-surprisin' crops;
They have read in the papers that the old
Jayhawk State
Is a passin' the procession at a mighty lively
gait.
In her days of woe they shook her, give it to
her in the neck,
Jest as rats out in the ocean will desert a
sinkin' wreck;
But she's weathered every breaker, an' she's
right in the advance,
An' they're sneakin' back to Kansas as repentant
emigrants.

In Wichita, the *Kansas Magazine* was revived for the third time. Unlike its predecessors, this *Kansas Magazine* was not primarily a literary journal, although each issue contained some poetry and fiction. From the advertisements and the majority of articles (featuring photographs of new public buildings, news of the establishment of new businesses or of the expansion of existing ones, and reports of real estate booms), it is obvious that the magazine's aim was to boost the image of Kansas by presenting it as a successful and progressive state.

Somehow, two poems completely out of step with the optimistic tenor of the time made their way into the *Kansas Magazine*: J. M. Metcalf's "Yesterday and Today" and "The City or the Prairie." Metcalf saw the price of modernization as too dear; in his view it had eroded the traditions of the pioneers who settled the state and also weakened the character of modern man. The pioneer's son could fly along in his automobile, but could he succeed in the ventures successfully undertaken by his forebears? Metcalf was apparently pessimistic about the answer.

Metcalf was not the only one questioning the direction Kansas seemed to be taking. Willard Wattles, a graduate student in literature at the University of Kansas who had spent some time studying in the East, was convinced that America's future lay in Kansas, if the state's traditional values could resist the spread of modernism. In 1914, Wattles published *Sunflowers*, an anthology of Kansas poetry. He delivered his manifesto in its introduction:

In 1911, Harry Kemp was one of a group of six at the University of Kansas to publish a volume called "Songs from the Hill." At that time in our pardonable enthusiasn, we argued that, since the centers of American literature had moved in the past from New York in the days of Irving and Cooper to New England in the days of Hawthorne and Emerson; thence in a later day to Indiana and Chicago; overlooking the fact that California has developed a literature of her own, that the next logical camping place of the muses should be on the banks of the "Kaw," as we euphoniously christen our muddy Kansas river. After living three years in New England, I am not so certain that we were entirely wrong.

Wattles collected 183 poems in *Sunflowers*, including five by Kemp and seventeen by himself in an attempt to prove his point and to preserve a poetic record of Kansas' heritage. He purposely did not copyright the anthology, hoping others would reprint it and make additions. While most of the verse in *Sunflowers* was about Kansas, Wattles' poems were for the most part attacks on the East, to which he juxtaposed his vision of Kansas. *Sunflowers* enjoyed limited success; it was reprinted with additions in 1916, but Wattles' hopes for Kansas literature were never realized. In fact, neither he nor Kemp stayed in Kansas long; both, ironically, returned to the corrupt, despised East.

Wattles' prediction that Kansas would become a literary center failed to become reality. Further, his view that the state presented a more attractive way of life than the East was not shared by those who were writing Kansas poetry just a few years after the appearance of *Sunflowers*. In the early 1920s, many of the poems about Kansas were negative. The dominant image of the state became that of a stagnant waste, a desert, an inhospitable place from which people longed to flee. C. L. Edson, whose poetry had appeared in *Sunflowers*, was the most strident voice among

those who found Kansas unattractive and inhospitable. Although some of his poems in *Sunflowers* are affirmative, others in that book and the majority of his work from the 1920s are attacks on Kansas traditions, especially the Puritan myth and the radicalism prevalent in the 1890s.

It is hard to say why poets stressed the negative aspects of Kansas in this period. Perhaps they were unconsciously reviving a myth about the area even older than the Puritan myth in Kansas. The prairie-plains region was once designated as the Great American Desert. The reports of the expeditions of Zebulon Pike and Stephen H. Long, both written in the early years of the nineteenth century, asserted that settlement could not be successfully extended into a land lacking in forests and navigable rivers. The dearth of these requisites seemed to make this area a natural boundary that would form the western limit to the spread of the American empire. Of course, the area was settled, but innovations were necessary: new strains of wheat, rail transport, the windmill, and other advances enabled agriculture to move onto the prairie-plains. With every period of adverse weather and poor prices, the desert myth would resurface. This, however, does not explain the negativism of the 1920s, which was a relatively prosperous era. The answer may lie in a feeling that Kansas was, in comparison to some other states, a cultural wasteland — an idea that is implied, if not explicitly stated, in the poetry of the time.

ODE TO KANSAS

Kansas: Where we've torn the shackles
 From the farmer's leg;
Kansas: Where the hen that cackles,
 Always lays an egg;
Where the cows are fairly achin'
To go on with record breakin',
And the hogs are raising bacon
 By the keg!

Sunflowers (1914).



Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

J. M. METCALF

Although there appears to be almost no available biographical information on Metcalf, the author of "The City or the Prairie" and "Yesterday and Today" appears to have been an interesting man. Metcalf's concern at such an early date (1909) with the effects of modernization on life in Kansas and with the erosion of frontier values makes these two poems important. In the same issues of the *Kansas Magazine* in which Metcalf's work was published, there are many poems that gush over the state and by doing so transform its landscape into a resemblance of the English countryside as described in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century poetry. Vic Harris' "The Kansas Harp" exemplifies this tendency:

The old footpath that follows
 Along the babbling brook,
Where lovers oft' have wandered
 To some shady, mossy nook —

These are the scenes I fancy,
 The strains I love to hear;
The Aeolian harp of Kansas
 Doth always bring me cheer.

Metcalf was one of the few poets of his time who doubted if material prosperity and progress were worth the toll on the human spirit.

THE CITY OR THE PRAIRIE

With clang and shock of never ceasing tread
 The city's iron wheels their roads repeat,
 With crash and rattle steel and granite meet,
While buzzing trolleys whistle overhead
And thoughts of rest and peace long since have fled
 From whirling brain and weary dragging feet,
 Worn by the hot, hard pavements in the street
Where jostling thousands toil for gold or bread.

To feel the prairie breezes sweep once more
 With glad free breath across the boundless plain,
To hear the lark his happiness outpour
 And see the rippling green of growing grain;
What riches has the city in its store,
 To call from these, that must not call in vain?

Kansas Magazine (December, 1909).

YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Along the dry, deep-rutted prairie trail
 The dusty oxen swung with toiling tread;
Behind, the prairie schooner, in full sail,
 With creak and rumble followed as they led,
Heaped high with all the settler called his own,
 The household treasures of the pioneer
Who left behind the settled land and the known
 And faced the unknown west without a fear.

Over a brick-paved, clean-swept city street,
 Where once the creaking, ox-drawn wagon went,
By deafening horn and gong's quick clanging beat
 Far heralded, and circled 'round with scent
Of gasoline, the motor car now speeds.
 With whiz of whirling wheels, with search-light's glare,
With dizzy haste that no obstruction heeds,
 The settler's son enjoys the evening air.

Kansas Magazine (November 1909).

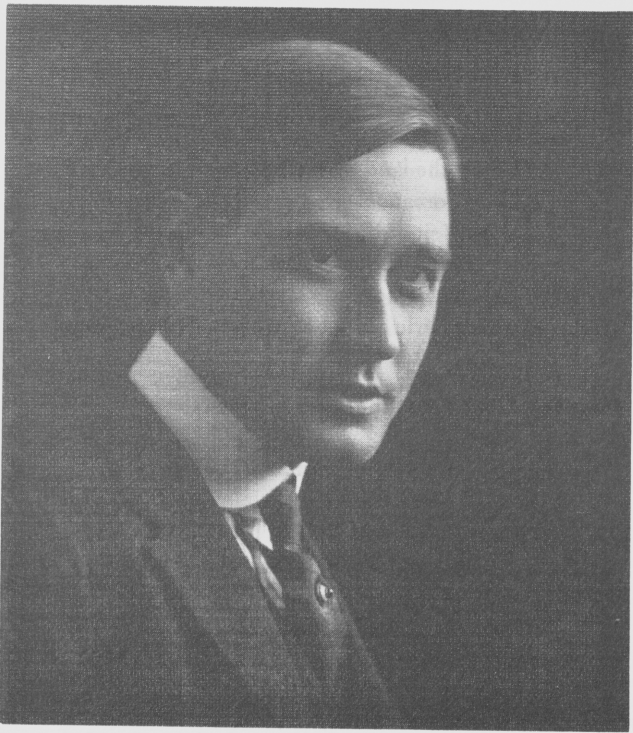


Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

WILLARD WATTLES (1888-1950) b. Bayneville, Kansas

Educated mainly at the University of Kansas, Wattles taught briefly at several universities before joining the faculty of Rollins College in Florida in 1927, where he remained until his death. Wattles wrote primarily religious verse, and his major contribution to Kansas poetry is *Sunflowers* (1914), an anthology of poems about Kansas. It includes many poets whose work appears in this anthology — Ware, Edson, Kemp, Stephens, and others. Wattles was one of the first to recognize that a large and interesting body of poetry about Kansas existed, and his own Kansas poems in *Sunflowers* are unique. Wattles spent some years as a graduate student and teacher at various eastern colleges before returning to Kansas, and his introduction and poems in *Sunflowers* make clear that he was happy to be in Kansas and away from the East. Wattles saw the East as a place devoid of energy, slowly sinking into decadence. “Stay West, Young Man” and “A Challenge to Youth” both illustrate the measure of his revulsion and his belief that Kansas would become the new center of American culture. In many ways, *Sunflowers* is the inspiration for this present anthology.

STAY WEST, YOUNG MAN

Out of the West they called me, and I turned my
face to the East
And there was pride in my going, as a bridegroom
goes to the feast;
Here in the land of legend and the region
of romance
I should sit at the feet of learning and
charter thought's advance,
For every eastern hill-top was sacred and divine
To the humble prairie plow-boy who sought in the
East, a sign.

Out of the East I turn me--God, what my eyes
have seen!--
From a land of degenerate farmers, from the Land
of the Might Have Been,
From the narrow hills of learning where
the lamp of truth goes out
And the still, small voice of the spirit is
drowned in the vulgar shout,
From a land of wanton cities and dread night things
that prey,

I turn my face to the West-land,--God, give me
one prairie day!

Give me the blaze of sunshine, give me the open
sky,
The crude, young strength of manhood undrained in
harlotry,
Give me a voice that thunders and wisdom
to restrain,
The flail of honest anger and pity for
men's pain,
Give me the faith of Kansas and a few young men
I know,
And we'll carry the gates of Gaza and shatter
Jericho.

The East is an ulcered carcass, bedecked like a
courtesan,
The West, like a boy, has heard her call and flushed
through his coat of tan,
 He has spent, like Samson, his body's
 strength for a gaudy finger-ring
 And the East has fettered him body
 and soul with a rope of twisted string;
But I cannot keep in silence the things that my eyes
 have seen
As I turn to the youth of Kansas from the land of
 the Might Have Been.

Sunflowers (1914).

A CHALLENGE TO YOUTH

Lo, I will shape you a song for only the strong
 to sing,
And swift are its words and sure as the hammered
 sword of a king,
And the grip of my hand is stern as I turn to its
 fashioning.
You who are young and clean and sweetened by
 the sun,
Who have followed the binder afield till the blinding
 day was done
And the sheaves of beaten gold were garnered every
 one,
Who have slept 'neath the open sky and pillowed
 a dusty head
On the shiny saddle-leather, nor wished for a better
 bed,
For you is the music moulded, for you is the anvil
 red.
I sing you the song of Kansas, of reaper, brand,
 and spade,
The sword of youth more splendid than Alexander's
 blade,
The flag of faith transcendent in a mighty last
 Crusade.

For I have seen the cities that loom over eastern
seas,
And trodden the purple vintage of ancient
revelries,
Where the simpering grin of Bacchus is the mask
of miseries.

The midnight reeled with laughter of rioting women
and men,
Sleek waiters tiptoed after and brimmed the glasses
again,
Till the night was a blare of ragtime and red with
lust and pain.

For this is the brood of the cities, elegant,
debonair,
Men with the scars of license and women with
shoulders bare —
But I have swung in the saddle and swallowed the
prairie air.

The tang of the sun-dried grasses, the spangled cup
of the sky,
The yelp of a hundred devils that shriek in the
coyote's cry,
And forty miles of freedom and the moon to canter
by.

For I have walked the corn-rows that are so cool
and green,
And I have found the nesting dove under the burdock
screen,
And many other wondrous things that no one of
these has seen.

Oh, none beside the farmer boy who walks the
rows of corn,
When blowing winds are ministers that sound a
silver horn,
And dreams bud like the prairie rose upon a fairy
thorn.

But now I sound to battle and brazen the notes are
blown,
You whom the sun has strengthened, follow! — the
flag is flown!
And if you will not follow, I'll spur to the charge
alone.

Lo, this is the song I shape you, a song for the
strong and fleet,
A sword for the arms that wrestle with slippery
shocks of wheat,
A flag of the dreams of Kansas by wide winds
winnowed sweet.

A sword for the youth of Kansas, a song for their
lips to sing,
The reckless sword of manhood, blue steel from the
furnacing,
Oh, who will dare to wear it, still fresh from its
fashioning?

Sunflowers (1914).

HARRY KEMP (1883-1960) b. Youngstown, Ohio

Famous in the 1920s as the "hobo poet," Kemp attended the University of Kansas and became friends with William H. Carruth and Willard Wattles, who no doubt influenced his poetry. He was in Kansas for a short time, and while his output of poetry about the state was moderate, it is of high quality. Kemp later wrote two autobiographical novels and religious plays and verse, but he never lived up to his early promise. He was well known in literary circles as a personality, but not as a first rate, accomplished writer.

A WHEAT-FIELD FANTASY

As I sat on a Kansas hilltop,
While, far away from my feet,
Rippled with lights and shadows
Dancing across acres of wheat,
The sound of the grain as it murmured
Wrought a wonder with me--
It turned from the voice of the Prairie
Into the roar of the sea,
And I saw, not the running wind-waves,
But an ocean that washed below
In ridging and crumbling
And ceaseless motion and flow;

Then, as a valley is flooded
With opaline mists at morn
Which momentarily flow asunder
And leave green spaces of corn,--

There burst the strangest vision
Up from that ancient sea.--
'Twas not the pearl-white Venus
Anadgomene,

'Twas the bobbing ears of horses
And a head with a great hat crowned
And a binder that burst upon me
Sudden, as from the ground--

And the waves gave place to the wheatlands
Myriad-touched with gold--
Then my soul felt century-weary
And untold aeons old;

For a rock-ledge sloped beside me
And the lime-traced shells it bore
Had plied that ancient ocean
Each with a sentient oar.

Sunflowers (1914).

THE LAND THAT GOD FORGOT

Oh, the land that God forgot
Where the sand and cactus ruled,
Paradise of rattlesnakes,
Bald and arid, brackish-pooled;

Hither Coronado came
Lusting after precious stones,
And the fiery desert waste
Whitened everywhere with bones;

Then the Forty-niners passed
With their oxen gaunt and thin
And they only knew the land
As a place to perish in;

But at last the mind of Man
With a vision fired and thrilled
Saw how empires lay asleep,
Dreamed of homes with comfort filled,

So the tawny sand was trenched
With a thousand fluid bars
Which revived the ancient plain
Like the waterways of Mars: —

Now the tender grass springs up,
And the sleek kine lay them down,
And the freights toil in and out,
Fat with wares from many a town;

And the wheat rolls, billowy-vast,
And the ancient ocean bed
Sends up miles of tasseled corn
Nodding many a silken head;

Schools are builded, churches rise,
Children to the clime are born,
And they learn to love the land
Once a hissing and a scorn.

The land that God forgot,
Cactus-haunted, desert-wild,
Where the wide, bare bluffs and plains
Never with a harvest smiled!

The land that God forgot,
Barren with Oblivion's curse! —
Nay, it held a wealth, like gold
In a miser's wretched purse.

God forget? Through all the years,
As a father 'neath a vow,
He preserved its virgin worth
For its marriage with the Plow.

Sunflowers (1914).

CHARLES LEROY EDSON (1881-1975) b. Wilber, Nebraska

After attending the University of Kansas, Edson began a career in journalism, writing columns and humorous poetry for various newspapers, including the *Kansas City Star*. He also published several booklets of poetry in the mid-1920s. His autobiography, *The Great American Ass* (1926), includes several caustic comments about the cultural and moral climate of Kansas:

I had come out of the Kansas culture, which is a derivation of the Harvard culture because Kansans are derived from the Puritan tribe. And this Kansas culture with its hatred of the superior man, and its belief in magic, clairvoyance, food from the atmosphere, Federal aid from governmental Santa Clauses and its identifying itself with the downtrodden beasts under a cruel master, was a tribal propoganda that forever disgusted me with all tribal propoganda.

All of Edson's serious (non-humorous) work is biting and sarcastic, especially when the subject is Kansas, and his attacks on the state's sacred traditions make his poetry vivid. Except for brief periods of moderate fame and prosperity, Edson's life was terribly wretched. In the 1930s, he eked out a living as a WPA project writer but lost contact with his family. In 1963, an article in the *Topeka Capitol* described him as living in a run-down hotel and subsisting on welfare. He died in a Topeka nursing home in 1975.

JOHN BROWN OF OSAWATOMIE

John Brown was an egomaniac, *he knew* how to save the world.
His brain was a spoonful of crude petroleum;
Into his wooden head they drove the red hot nail
Of Abolition,
And John Brown's brains caught fire.

John Brown murdered his neighbors,
He marched by night with torch and knife,
He struck off a man's arm with his home-made sword,
He disemboweled a youth in the presence of a mother,
All in the name of Brotherly Love.

John Brown loved 'em to death.
He flouted society,
He coerced courts by inviting thugs to "appeal to Osawatomie,"
And he lifted a bloody hand to seize the Flag.

John Brown said, "If you free the slave, you will end all
human ills,"

But the world continued sick, and later prophets have offered
these later remedies:

Free Silver,
Phrenology,
Paper Bag Cookery,
Grape Juice,
Soviet Government

And a law to prevent the rich packer from putting Benzoate of Soda
in the poor man's tomato catsup.

Prairie Fire (1924).

Kansan Patents Hopper Electrocution Machine

Rounded Up in a Scoop Then
Dropped Into a Drum,
Sealed in Jail Ready for
Death.

KILLED WITH ELECTRIC CHARGE

In a Short Time Inventor
Catches a Bushel Basket
Containing More Than
10,000 Greedy Hoppers.

Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

"HORACE GREELEY IN KANSAS"

(Speech of the editor of the New York Tribune,
May 18, 1859, at Osawatomie, Kas., the day that the
Republican party was organized in Kansas Territory).

"Freemen of Kansas; The great struggle
Lies before us.

I would not seek to fill you
With unwarranted hope
Nor overweening confidence of success.

I am too old for illusions;
I no longer hold that if a cause be just,
That cause will win.

Vast opposing powers are determined to defeat us.
Three billion dollars of property
In negro flesh and blood; the mind staggers
To survey it!

But the heart of humanity beats high with hope;
Barbarous Russia has resolved to strike the shackles
From her shackled millions!

I dare to hope that we will triumph
On our next great battle field.
Keep the flag of the Republic floating high in Kansas.
Free Soil men in martyrs' graves
Lie thick around us.

Do not trail the Freeman's banner
On this soil so lately reddened
By their patriotic blood."

So the Grand Old Party was born in Kansas, lifting its hands to
Russia.

Half a century is gone; new generations have arisen.
Three billion are one summer's crop of the Kansas fields.
New parties rise with blood red flags
And pin their hopes to Russia
Where the unshackling is still going strong.
"History with her volumes vast hath but one page."

Prairie Fire (1924).

MY SAGE-BRUSH GIRL

Under a cross in a rainless land my Sagebrush Girl
is sleeping,
Her beautiful eyes shine out no more; her cheeks
have shed their bloom.
The cactus pierces her dreamless heart and I have
ceased from weeping.
My eyes are dry as the stunted sage that parches
o'er her tomb.

The years have withered my flesh like grass, and
filled my heart with knowing;
I, who was desert born and reared, have won to
the garden lands,
Where the earth is robed in a rug of green and
the barley blooms are blowing,
And the dewdrops blaze where the stalks of maize
hold up their heavenly hands.

Deep in the dust of a desert waste my Sagebrush
Girl reposes;
Her beautiful eyes shine out no more; her lips have
bloomed and died;
A gypsum bed in the desert dead has won her
cheeks' red roses;
And the day of our dream is a sinking sun dipped
under the Great Divide.

I know who wielded the flaming sword that drove
my tribe before me
Into the dusty desert wide, where all the flowers
are dead;
Know why we met in a rainless land when the dream
of dreams came o'er me;
We were the disinherited kin of the lords of meat
and bread.

We were the poor outside the door of the Garden
of Singing Water;
The poor who scurry like hunted things to the
arid wastes to hide.
So I was born to the desert sands and she was the
desert's daughter —
But I have won to the garden lands, while she in the
desert died.

Those yearning days were a drama dear that the
drop of the curtain closes.
Her beautiful eyes shine out no more, her lips have
ceased to glow.
A gypsum bed in the desert dead has won her cheeks'
red roses,
But I have seen from a hillside green the black
hawk drifting slow.

Sunflowers (1914).

THE PRAIRIE PIONEERS

He builded a house of sod on the slope of a prairie
knoll;
He builded in praise of God, content with the scanty
dole.
He had builded a nest in the grass, as the ground-
squirrels burrow low;
And hither he led a laughing lass in the days of long
ago.
He was a lad and she was a maid;
Their hearts were glad; they were unafraid
Of the world and its waiting woe.

The prairie wind in her face tumbled her tresses
down,
The sensitive rose, in its grace, clung to her cotton
gown.
The prairie dog beat a retreat and watched them
mournful-eyed,
And the buffalo grass beneath her feet said: "Woe
to the prairie bride!"
He was a husband and she was a wife;
A-foot in the daisy fields of life;
They would not be denied.

Who did the law ordain, who wrote the dread
decree
That into the desert plain the children of men
should flee?
Into a treeless land, the land of little rain,
Pressed and driven by penury's hand, shackled
with poverty's chain;
Youth to sicken and love to die,
Beauty blasted and hope gone dry,
And grief in a maddened brain.

Ever the hot wind blew, sapping the famished
corn;
The night, unblessed by dew, fevered the breath
of morn.
A man agape at the skies where no cloud fleeces
go;
Weeping, the broken woman lies in the dugout's
furnace glow.

His hope, like the sod corn, curls and wilts;
She writhes on a bed of cotton quilts
In a mother's nameless woe.

O, wind, you are hellish hot; death is the song you
sing;

The eggs in the quail's nest rot under her tortured
wing.

Dust in a choking cloud wavers and sifts and flies;
Dust is the dead babe's pauper shroud; on her sick
breast it lies.

The sod corn crumbles and blows away,
Chaff in the clouds of smoking clay,
Surging against the skies.

He builded a house of sod on the slope of a prairie
knoll;

He builded in praise of God, content with the scanty
dole.

He had builded a nest in the grass, as the ground-
squirrels burrow low;

And hither he led a laughing lass in the days of long
ago.

He was a lad and she was a maid;
Their hearts were glad; they were unafraid
Of the world and its waiting woe.

Sunflowers (1914).

THE PRAIRIES POSSESSED

O, I saw no hope in your eyes:
Only the brave, stubborn stare of a strong man dying;
I heard no song in your sighs:
But I learned the patience of life from your savage
crying;
I beheld no God in your dust,
But I glimpsed the hunted homes of the banished fiends and the fairies;
And I felt in your death the thrust
Which the whole world gives and parries.

Farewell! No more in the night
Will you drive me to terrible thoughts in your lonely places;
Farewell! No more need I fight
Monotony's giant sloth in your stagnant spaces.
And though you denied my youth
With its fragile elusive days and its luminous shattering
flashes,
I'm content with the scars of truth
That I bear from your bitter lashes.

Kansas Authors' Bulletin (April/July, 1924).

A SONG FOR THE PRAIRIES

Men who sell their souls to the inland
Must be patient with quiet things;
Never for them the hymn of the hills
And never the chanty the wild sea sings.

Iron peace is the code of the hill-men;
Proudly they dwell where the storm heads are;
Comrade of star and wind they live;
Then rest, and the prayers of their wind and star.

Men of the sea live gladly, gladly,
Wet with the spray of the restless waves;
Men of the sea die boldly, madly,
Hurled by the storm into living graves.

Men of the plains hear the dull rain falling;
Men of the plains hear the lone dog's cry;
Listening close for their old dreams calling,
Building their days 'neath a sepulchre sky.

Contemporary Kansas Poetry (1927).

DESERT

Sage brush! Mile after mile,
Quiet in the sun, and shimmering;
Ever in the sun, ever shimmering!
The long low mountains
Seem to crouch beneath the heat,
And the earth, dried to a powder,
Is strewn with choked brown grass.
Ants burrow in the ground
And live on things that perish here.
Stream beds are dry, beaten paths
Of rabbits and sage coyotes
That for keen thirst run the full length
Of each ravine, and fall at last
As did one here, whose bones lie scattered,
White as snow beneath the sun.
God, the waste! the quivering waste!
Where things grow up to die!

Contemporary Kansas Poetry (1927).

JESSICA CRAFTON

ALIEN

Beneath me the fissured earth powders barren in my hands;
my taut, dry body knows the earth's pain.

There in the vertical glare of the sun
the bald hill lifts a blanching alkali spot;
my soul is like that in its desertness.

Far across these heated plains the deep sea calls to me.
Tears.
Madness is cheated once more.

Some day the sea's distant voice may not move me to tears.

Contemporary Kansas Poetry (1927).

PRAIRIE PANIC

From that high, flat, empty land
 In nameless terror streaking,
Like bright, incongruous metal toys,
 The streamliners go shrieking.

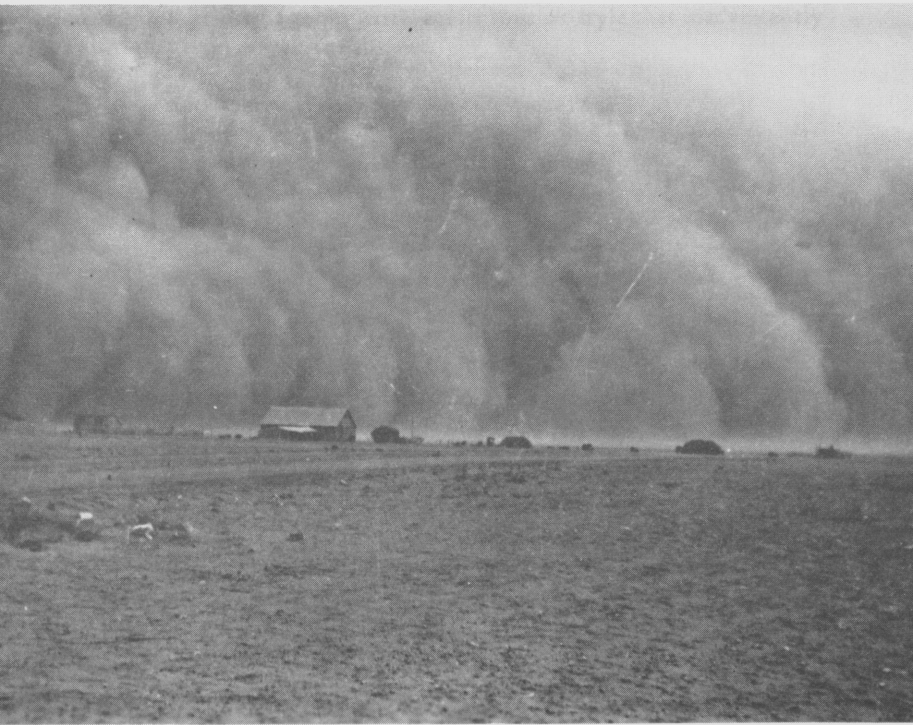
I shall confess, some day, I know
 That same wild terror of the plains,
And letting reason fly, I'll go
 Screaming Eastward, like the trains.

Kansas Magazine (1941).

SECTION III

POETICS, THE DUST BOWL, AND THE DEPRESSION

1925-1940



A dust storm in Morton County, Kansas, in the 1930s. Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

One of the poems in *Sunflowers* — “Harry Kemp,” which is nominally a letter from Wattles to Kemp — is concerned with a problem basic to Kansas poets: how to define and describe the essential qualities of Kansas without resorting to an extravagant tone or style that inadvertently conceals rather than reveals the subject.

There's no poetry in August when the sweat runs
down your back,
And you feel the hot winds sizzle till they burn
your whiskers black,
When it seems as if your pitchfork has been dipped
in melted lead
And the threshing-engine chuckles to the red sun
overhead,
And you flounder in the barges choked with flying
chaff and dirt
While the wheat-beards grow familiar through your
salt and sippy shirt.
Then you'd like to kill the poet who slops over at
the mouth
When the gentle August zephyrs come hell-blazing
from the south;
You would like to set him pumping when the windmill
wheel is dead
And you have to furnish water for your thirsty
hundred-head;
When you sluice your heaving porkers with cold
water all day long
You could massacre the minstrel who would set the
thing in song.

.....

But I wonder if the beauty some Byronic poet sings
Is as real as the beauty underlying common things,
And I wonder if in Kansas where we wrestle with distress
There is not a subtler beauty underneath the ugliness?

The problems Wattles describes above — the tensions between subject and form, reality and the ideality of artistic vision — have always faced writers. In the 1920s, it became increasingly difficult for poets to write successfully about Kansas in a positive manner because during this period the mass media — movies, radio, and the large metropolitan newspapers — as well as the automobile, began to offer escape from the state's traditional mores and limited horizons. The long-standing geographical and cultural boundaries between regions began to crumble as a new culture emerged — national in scope, and emphasizing a sophisticated urbanism with a more elastic moral code.

Here in Kansas poets found it difficult to produce work in the local context without seeming provincial. Some poets, like Allen and Jessica Crafton, C. L. Edson, and P. Roy Brammell, may have found it easier to write poems critical of the state than struggle against being labeled as provincial. Several poems by Helen Rhoda Hoopes, however, indicate that Kansas life could indeed have been the basis for successful poetry, but she also concedes in "Wisdom of Pine Trees" that few Kansans were interested in reading them. Richard Scneider's "Poetless Kansas" echoes this view.

Despite all the difficulties, the 1920s saw poetry flourish in Kansas. The Kansas Authors Club, which had been founded near the turn of the century, had grown considerably and brought the poets of the state more public exposure. KAC publications allowed writers in all genres to be aware of what others were doing, and poetry in particular reached a new level of achievement. One prominent member of the KAC, Arthur Capper, had established a publishing empire in Topeka, and many poems about Kansas appeared in his various newspapers and magazines. Helen Rhoda Hoopes, another KAC member, edited a new anthology, *Contemporary Kansas Poetry* (1927), which also kept Kansas poetry in the forefront of public attention.

With the coming of the depression and the dust bowl in the early 1930s, Kansas poets were faced with real tragedy. The old concerns over how to present the reality of Kansas and how to avoid provincialism suddenly became passé; poets regained their positions as spokesmen for the deepest feelings of their communities, voicing the fears, frustrations, and hopes of Kansans as they struggled through those difficult years. It is ironic that it took a catastrophe like the "Dirty '30s" to effectively stimulate regionalism in the arts. Two artists, one a painter and the other a poet, found the means to fuse the past and present into powerful works of art that spoke of present problems while revealing and interpreting Kansas history. The painter was John Steuart Curry; the poet was Kenneth Porter, whose work will be discussed in the next section.

HELEN RHODA HOOPES (1886-1972) b. Kansas City, Kansas

Hoopes had a long and distinguished career as an English teacher at the University of Kansas. She was involved in several literary organizations, including the Quill Club, the Kansas Poetry Society, and the Kansas Authors Club. She edited an anthology, *Contemporary Kansas Poetry* (1927), and published regularly in the newspapers and magazines of the region, including the *Kansas Magazine*. "Winter Twilight on the Victory Highway," "Demeter in Kansas," "Stars over Wichita," and "The Wisdom of Pine Trees" are all excellent treatments of certain aspects of life in Kansas. "Winter Twilight on the Victory Highway" shows a Kansas farm, seemingly insulated from the rush of the modern world. Although the radio brings in the outside world just as the nearby highway provides access to it, the events on the farm, concerned as they are with the eternal cycles of life, are more important than the "mighty music from Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Edgewater Beach" and "the tendencies of modern fiction" that seem to concern that world. "Demeter in Kansas" continues this theme of the fundamental qualities of Kansas life — the closeness to the earth and the procreative processes. Kansans must make some renunciations, however, including "our forebears' heritage" of coast, mountain, and forest. Not all Kansans accept such a life, with its small pleasures and many denials. "Stars over Wichita" describes three women in Wichita with no identification with Kansas; they eat a cosmopolitan lunch served in a Spanish tea room, and then proceed to a theatre whose decor includes an artificial sky. The sacrifices of pioneer women ("Dying alone to bear the sons of pioneers") stand in stark contrast to these three women who live in an unreal world, cut off from their Kansas heritage. "The Wisdom of Pine Trees" is about aesthetics and poetry and could have been written about the problems that face a poet writing about local material. Hoopes believes that Kansans have lost their appreciation for the rough beauty which would have to be the basis of any Kansas aesthetic and prefer a more formal, refined art. On the strength of these four poems, Hoopes must be considered one of the most accomplished Kansas poets.

WINTER TWILIGHT ON THE VICTORY HIGHWAY

The mellow concave of the sky rests its pale apricot brim
On the brown edges of the Kansas prairie.
Venus and Jupiter, two distant crumbs of light,
Cling to its cerulean surface.
Twilight smudges the nearer fields
Where snow lies white in patches.
The dry cornstalks solemnly mark time
In long rustling rows
Up and over the curve of the hill
In the west seven acres.

The little house and the big barn
Draw closer together in the dusk.
Things are happening in the house
And in the barn: cosy, comfortable things
That have to do with pails and frying pans and cradles
And whatever leads to supper and an early bedtime.

Along the highway, between drifts of snow,
Leviathans with gleaming eyes
Glide ceaselessly
To the city--from the city--
From the city--to the city.

Sometimes the little house and the big barn
Delegate someone to go to the city,
Someone who is told to come back
Before it gets dark.
You see, there are so many things going on at home,
Happy duties that no one should miss.

Two wires are strung between the little house and the big barn.
From the lower one limp garments dangle:
Aprons, and heavy blue drill shirts,
And a baby's pink gingham rompers.
(It hadn't been quite cold enough to freeze them dry.)
On the upper wire there is nothing--nothing that anyone can see.
Like a fishing net of a single strand.
It reaches out into the wide ocean of the air
And gathers in a harvest of messages:
Market reports and recipes, sermons and solos,
The weather, bedtime stories, and music,
Music from Los Angeles, Hawaii, and Edgewater Beach.

So busy is every living creature
In the little house and in the big barn
That not one of them cares a flip about Jurgen,
Or the marriage problem,
Or life at Deauville,
Or the tendencies of modern fiction,
Or "Sweeney among the nightingales."
Nor would they care, even if they knew about such tiresome things,
For here at home,
New things are always going to happen,
Really intoxicating things.
They are going to get a new car, maybe, and a washing machine;
And Lady will have another Jersey calf.
Soon they will have to move the old baby into the crib
And make the cradle ready for the new baby.
They will plow the west seven acres, and get more stock;
They will buy new dishes, and a rug for the front room,
And get a loudspeaker. And nothing will stop them--nothing--
Unless the day comes too soon to join a slow procession
Along the Victory highway, (Leviathans then must wait,)
Up to the little churchyard on the crest of the hill,
To add another stone to those sturdily keeping the faith there now.

But in the little house they have not yet had time
To think of the slow procession.
They are young and very strong.
There is good food in the pantry, and plenty of sweet hay in the
big barn.

In the spring the redbud will blossom;
The pasture will be green again.
The fields must be harrowed and planted.
They will plant potatoes and beans, and put new shingles on the
house.

The meadow lark will whistle in the stillness,
And in the barnyard
Buff Orpingtons will clatter over their yellow corn.

And every day, from morning until midnight,
Along the highway,
Between banks of evening primroses,
Blue spiderwort, and wild verbena,
Leviathans of shining nickel and enamel
Will make their swift and ceaseless journeys
To the city--from the city--
From the city--to the city.
More and more pink rompers will hang on the sagging lower wire;
And over the upper one will come messages,
Stock reports and symphonies,
Mighty music from Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Edgewater Beach.

Contemporary Kansas Poetry (1927).

WISDOM OF PINE TREES

Three beautiful pine trees
Grew on the brink of a gully
In Kansas.

They were tall, with wide, out-reaching branches
Bent at angles delightfully irregular.
Their needles were green and flexible and resinous.
Their trunks were brown and straight,
Just as the trunks of pine trees ought to be;
Except that, like the Parthenon,
They curved enough to make them perfect.
Their cones, like pineapples, were marvels of overlappings,
Neat yet intricate.
And yet, because these lofty conifers
Grew on the brink of an untidy gully
In the vicinity of crumbling houses, ugly as influenza,
Nobody saw their soft green overwhelming beauty
Except me.

The wisdom of pine trees is to grow
Where a gardener can find them when they are slim and small
And easily transplantable.
Then they will march majestically
Before the mansions of the very rich
Together with roses and magnolias
And other attributes of a hand-decorated lawn
On which a cultivated child or two
May dance decorously.

Pine trees that grow on the gnawed brink
Of dirty gullies in the state of Kansas
Merely have poems written about them:
Poems that are never read.

The Harp (November-December, 1927).

DEMETER IN KANSAS

A Kansas sun blazed over a small frame house,
Or Kansas stars burned steadily overhead,
Or Kansas rain dripped blessedly
From overhanging eaves to garden plots,
When we were born;
Yet we still say, "Out here," as if exiled from home
We must forget our forebears' heritage of mountains, hills,
Rocks dashed with ocean spray, green wooded isles,
Clear inland lakes, deep rivers running to the sea,
Huge rocks, bright streams, and shallow water falls.
The prairie is our mother.
She brushed off her fringe of waving grasses;
She wrapped about her a girdle of golden wheat;
Yellow corn dropped from her fingers;
She warmed in her broad bosom
Our cities and our little towns.
We must live happily between horizons
Level and blue;
We must love sun and wind and sand,
And find waves only in ripples of wheat,
And gold in its garnered store.
We must travel miles of geometric roads;
And lay our weary limbs at last
In the brown embrace of prairie earth,
One with Demeter and eternity.

Kansas Magazine (1936).

STARS OVER WICHITA

The tea room, done in Spanish style,
Echoed to syllables of social chatter.
The waitress, in peach-colored muslin,
Was Beatrice Lillie done by Goya.
(She knew she looked like Lady Peel
And made the most of it.)

Three ladies threw back their furs,
And ordered consomme,
With Russian salad, black tea with lemon,
And pineapple mousse.
A nibble at a thin wafer
Brought their luncheon to a delicate close.
A brief immersion of polished nails in clear water;
A regulated tip for Lady Peel;
Deft dabs of perfumed powder;
Fur closely drawn; departure.
The motor purred like a sleek, tawny cat.

In the new theater rose Spanish walls, vine-draped;
Clouds of a sunset, moonrise tint
Veiled a blue sky where small stars
Twinkled so artfully
That only by a little did they miss the splendor
Of being real . . .

Outside, above the roof, an early winter dusk revealed
Dazzle of stars;
Stars over Wichita; stars that, not many years ago,
Bathed in their brightness blackened campfires,
Bleaching bones,
The rust of shattered firearms,
And the low graves of anguished women,
Dying alone to bear the sons of pioneers.

Kansas City Star.

POETLESS KANSAS

"Kansas has no poet" . . . Jack Harris

Kansas
has no poet.

Golden
wheat overflows
the spacious bins, and
tawny yellow corn lies
in great heaps.

The cattle on a
thousand hills, graze
peacefully, while rough
tractors nudge shining
motors, where
pawing horses
fed.

Sleek
black swine
feed eagerly, in
the shadow of tall
silos and flocks of white
hens provide
pin-money.

A
radio sends
its dull rhythm
into the evening breeze
and the wayside mail
box sprouts the
book of the
month.

Kansas
has no poet. It
needs none. The folks
have gone to the
nearest
talkie.

Topeka Daily Capital (23 July, 1930).

KANSAS FARMER

MAIL & BREEZE

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Number 45

*That's
How You're Gonna Keep
'Em Down On The Farm*



Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

KANSAS HAS NO POET

Kansas has no poet,
 Kansas — blatant as a blizzard,
Calm as the quiet after a tornado,
Tender as the creeping grama grass in spring;
Cocky, arrogant, and soft as the wild dove's coo —
Kansas has no poet.

Well, Kansas is young
And song is old —
 The morning stars sang together.
But how old is old?
Tell me, you lingering pioneer
With your endless talk of bison and Indian and stubborn
 sod, and dug-out, and grasshopper and drought,
How old is old?
Did your women croon lullabies?
Did your lovers sing in the moonlight?
Did your hell-raising horse-back preachers mingle shouts
 of joy and songs of praise with their moans
 and groans?
How old is old?
Tell me, you youngster with your, "Aw that's old stuff"?
How old is old?
Yesterday is as dead and as ripe for song
As that morning when the stars sang together
And the little hills clapped their hands.

Coronado sweated and swore his way across the Kansas plains.
Do you know what horses he rode?
Oh, horses of song:
Adventure and Romance
Sired by the proud stallion Ambition
Out of Avarice.
Do you think he sang as he rode?
And a pious father chanted chants of ancient days.
How old is old?

But "every poet is mad,"
And Kansas is sane.
The 49-ers, hot with lust for gold,
Ploughed trails across her plains
With dragging feet and ribald song.
The covered wagon carried psalms as well as bullets;
John Brown rode away to his gibbet
And his soul went marching on.
The Jayhawkers sang dirty songs
As they came home from dirty work.
The crows cawed a requiem over the ashes of Lawrence.
The Sockless One, the Bearded One, and the
 Woman-with-a-Fiery-Tongue,
Gave battle to a Dragon, and slashed at the tentacles
 of an Octopus;
Carrie Nation fought a Demon with a woodshed hatchet;
And how sane is sane?

Kansas has no poet.
The Father of the Rivers is Over Yonder.
The morning stars are dimmed by the highway lights;
The hands of the little hills are buried in furrows;
In the foothills little rills lilt their way
To turgid pools and are lost.
A meadow lark opens its throat
And the plough boy's ear is filled with the chug of the tractor.
A mile of billow rolls across an ocean of wheat;
The corn leaves rustle and whisper in tune with What Is;
The sightless mole burrows his blind way,
An owl hoots at night.
And Kansas has no poet.

Kansas Magazine (1939).

BILLY MCCARROLL

KANSAS SAND HILLS

I am not far from town
And houses are built upon me--
Yet strangely I am far away.
I am not beautiful, I know;
Yet I will last in pleasant memory.
I have no rock,
But only sand and withered grasses,
And some plum bushes on my nearer slopes.
I am sleeping and furious, like arctic storms,
Yet come to me some summer day
For peace.
My sand is soft and warm,
My withered dryness somehow is not hostile.
And the song of the meadow-lark is sweet--
Come out, Come out! . . .
Out here!

The Harp (May-June, 1927).

KATHRYN WHITE RYUN

THE PRAIRIE

Here once a cool sea-darkness spanned
Distance to distance earth's virginity;
Here once, subsiding, . . . rising, . . . pliant sand
Commingled softly with the under-sea —
Until betrayal made it land.

Now is endured intrusion of the sun.
Now pierced by sunlight to its marrow,
Fecund against its will, outstretched, unwon,
It bears dry wheat after the plow and harrow —
Taut, as a captured woman bears a son.

The Harp (July/August 1928).

KANSAS

In grey, discouraged endlessness the hills
Unravel to the long and listless plains.
In unsuspected pregnancy the fields
Lie naked, blue black, sullen in their sleep.
Like weathered droppings of some giant bull,
Low, grey ranch buildings sprawl in scattered heaps
Amid a rusted litter of machines,
Old furniture, tin cans, and grimy wash.
And then, with quick, bold strokes the strumpet land
Flings on the spring, displays in loud, gay tunes
Its gorgeous greens, the cardinal's caustic red,
And boasts new golden tractors to the sun.
Big, coarse, uncouth, and blatantly ill-bred,
It flaunts the crown of thorns upon its head.

Kansas Magazine (1942).

A University of Kansas graduate, Ward lived at Belpre and Wellington. Many of her poems were published in newspapers and magazines, and there are collections of her work available as well. Ward served as editor of *The Harp*, a poetry magazine, and was a friend and mentor to many Kansas poets during her long active period in Kansas literature.

SPRING IN THE DUST BOWL

The bristly wire-grass, gray upon the whole land,
Nags at the feet that seek a way to where
Something shows faintly green a long way over.
A settler's house was there,
For three thin lilac bushes, sole survivors,
Grow in the cellar hole. Who paid the cost
Of living here, and the greater cost of leaving?
Even his path is lost.

Kansas City Times (6 August, 1938).

IN TIME OF DROUGHT

Drought is not only the lack of rain,
Not only —
In drought man thinks that he prays in vain.
Oh, lonely,
Discouraged, forsaken, he shrivels inside —
Apart
From the bone-bare field and the choking herd,
There is drought of heart.

Augusta Gazette (August 3, 1935).



Photo courtesy of the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*.

TORNADO

Leaves stood still and our hearts stood still
But the sky was a-boil with clouds,
A coppery wrack and the greenish black
Of shrouds.

We dove for shelter and none too soon.
The universe swayed and swirled.
The monstrous horn of a unicorn
Gored the world.

Kansas Magazine (1937).

ALIEN

Remember how the sharp sand cut
The wheat and equally the heart
In days of drouth? Remember dust
Yellow as copper, red as rust,
And granite black? It swirled and seethed.
And yet in spring new wildflowers wreathed
The prairie stretches, seeded there
By winds that blew from who knows where.

How red the fruit, how tall the grain
Since alien dust enriched the plain.

The Harp (September/October 1949).

BLACK BLIZZARD

All day long the wind
Whipped the wheat fields
Into black clouds of fine silt
And hurled them through the air,
Hiding the sun, bringing
Desperation to the farmer,
Despair to the housewife,
Dejection to all.

At night the wind ceased,
And slowly, beginning at the zenith,
Forming an ever-widening circle
Until only the horizon
Was enveloped in dust,
The blue sky looked forth
Innocently
Upon a dirty-faced world.

Kansas Magazine (1938).



CRY FROM THE DUST BOWL

This heat!

If only the sky could find a cloud;
If only rain would come to soften
The brittle glare of the sun.

This wind!

Even the leafless trees
Strain towards the north
As if they tugged at their stubborn roots
Seeking relief in pulling towards the north;
The wind has hammered the trees,
Has whipped them till they sag,
Ugly and grim.

This dust!

From the south, the wind
Lashes the dust in giant pinwheels
And swirls it in sudden fury
To shut out the hardness of the sun,
So that the sun now dully glows
In a jaundiced sky.
Broken twigs and branches
Tumble, end over end,
And race before the storm
Until they are caught beside a fence
And buried in the drift of dust.

Silent, the world is:

Only the beating of the wind
And the rattle of sand
On the window panes;
The beating of the wind
And the rattle of sand,
The rattle of sand. . . .

This Hell!

Why can't there be rain?

Kansas Magazine (1940).

SECTION IV

REESTABLISHING THE TRADITION

1940-1960

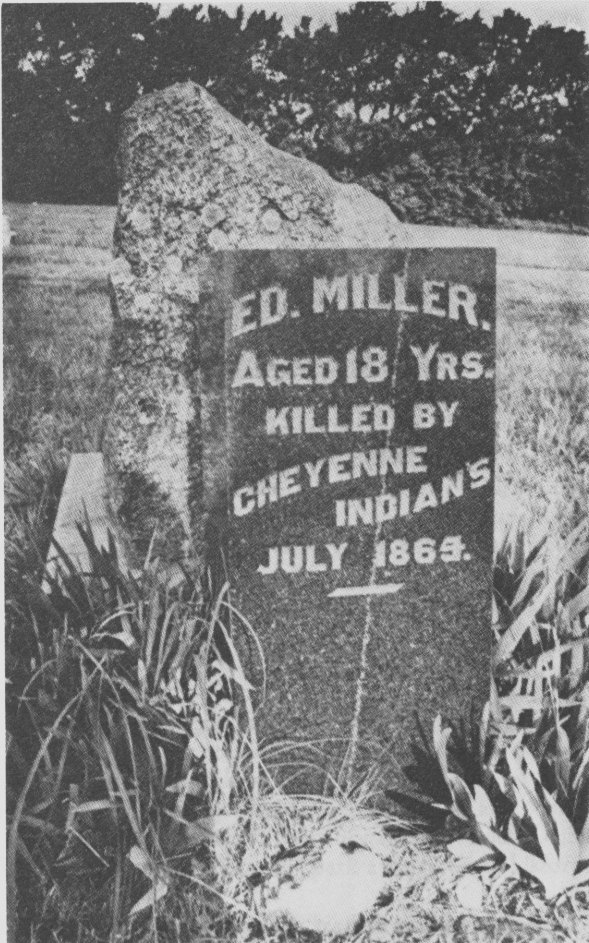


Photo courtesy of the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*.

The poet who worked most with the subject of the Kansas farmer and the conditions of the 1930s was Kenneth Porter. Porter, a native Kansan, brought a highly educated, politically radical voice back into Kansas poetry. A historian as well as a poet, Porter used events from Kansas history to depict the farmer's continual struggle against an unfair economy and an unpredictable climate. In "The Happy Farmer" and "Dark Saying," however, Porter expresses the farmer's oppression directly, without explicit historical references. These poems gain impact from their simplicity and brevity, but it is in Porter's longer works that his technique and power are fully revealed. "The Land of the Crippled Snake" and "Harvest: June, 1938" are history lessons designed to show Kansans the links between their past and their present; and the poems also suggest that the future can be directed if only the lessons of history are applied. Porter seems to view the heritage of Kansas as a source of weaknesses and problems as well as of strength and endurance. Rather than struggling against oppressive economic forces, the Kansas farmer stoically endures each new catastrophe, learning nothing from the experience. By spelling out the lessons of history in the vivid language of poetry, Porter may have hoped to awaken the Kansas farmer and goad him into political and social activism.

Apparently Porter's message was largely unheeded, for political conservatism became a trademark of the state in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was a rather moribund period for Kansas poetry, although William Inge's success as a playwright came at this time, indicating that Kansas was still a viable subject for literature. 1954 and 1961 were both centennial years (Kansas became a territory in 1854 and a state in 1861), and the celebrations of these years did spark an interest in history.

Other writers followed Porter's lead in using history as a subject for poetry, but few could match his level of achievement. Those that did, like Virginia West Sykes and Vera Eutsler, wrote poems that are concise and

direct. Lora Reiter's "Out of the Dreaming Dust," which won an award in the centennial celebration of 1961, indicates the problems many writers had in working with historical material. The poem is coherent and the images effective, but somehow it fails to convincingly link the importance of historical events to the "dream" of contemporary Kansans. Using history as the basis for poetry may be a mistake unless the poet has a way of breathing life and significance into the past. Porter's success probably derives from his strong political convictions. He possessed a firm grasp of history and knew exactly what he wanted it to convey in his poetry. Such a combination of knowledge and ability is evidently a rare thing.

In 1960, a book of poetry was published in New Mexico that clearly signalled a new direction in Kansas poetry. The book was *West of Your City*, by William Stafford. *West of Your City* was divided into three sections: "Midwest," "West," and "Outside." Stafford, a native Kansan who moved west to teach at Lewis and Clark College in Oregon, devoted the "Midwest" section to memories of his life in Kansas and his continuing ties to the state. "One Home" is a description of his childhood, and this poem makes it clear that Stafford has found an effective if not completely new way of writing about Kansas. He deals with Kansas on a personal level; he reveals what effect the state has had on his life. History is never explicit; there may be a reference to a date — "the fourth of July" — but it is remembered for what happened within the limited world of Stafford's family — "a wildcat jumped at grandfather." Stafford's history is thus not a record of external events — elections and wars and economic fluctuations — but of moments that are important events in his emotional and spiritual life. This is how Kansas poetry has been since 1960 — personal, subtle, and better than ever before.

Kenneth Porter's poetry reveals his deep-rooted ties to several important cultural forces in Kansas (Prohibition, a strong religious influence, the pioneering impulse) and implies other connections — a personal attachment to the land, an awareness of the workings of historical processes on the individual, and a commitment to humanity. Porter is very much a poet of this century, but the concerns which link him to earlier Kansas poetic traditions began in the early 1920s at the close of his undergraduate studies at Sterling College:

During my last couple of years as an undergraduate, however, I did experience a couple of developments which later indirectly influenced my poetry — an interest in the "human condition," which, except in racial matters, had not previously much concerned me, and a reconstruction of my hitherto extremely orthodox religious views. Sterling College, although extremely conservative in almost every conceivable respect, nevertheless did subscribe to The Nation, The New Republic, and The World Tomorrow, and these publications, plus my parents' Populist-Prohibitionist background, prepared me to become involved in 1924 in William Allen White's anti-KKK campaign for the governorship and Robert M. LaFollette's simultaneous campaign for the presidency.

As a graduate student at Harvard a few years later, Porter began to associate with other student-poets whose political, religious, and artistic beliefs were close to his own. Together they organized the Poetry Forum in Cambridge and collaborated on a booklet of "Christian social-vision" poetry, *Christ in the Breadline* (1932). Porter also published *Pilate before Jesus: Biblical and Legendary Poems*, a volume which, Porter recently said, "got the impulse to depend heavily on Biblical themes out of my system." During his association with the Poetry Forum, Porter also experienced the disrupting effects of the Depression:

The Depression intensified my "social consciousness" and stimulated my writing of socio-religious poems. I formalized my radical tendencies in 1932 by joining the Socialist Party and engaging in soap-boxing and organizing. The effect of drought, dust-storms and depression on my native state gave me new themes and a new symbolism. Depression in the U. S., rising fascism abroad, the destruction of the agricultural environment, and the lack of any commensurate economic reward to those most intimately involved in agriculture, caused me to return to what Selden Rodman . . . called Social Symbolism.

Porter's first major collection of poetry, *The High Plains* (1938), contains many poems inspired by his experiences in dust-bowl Kansas. His second book, *No Rain from These Clouds*, although published eight years later,

continues to deal with those experiences — most notably in the last section, “Ad Astra Per Aspera,” which includes “The Land of the Crippled Snake” and “Harvest: June, 1938,” a version of which appeared in the 1939 *Kansas Magazine*. “The Land of the Crippled Snake” presents little difficulty to the reader, but “Harvest: June, 1938” is a more personal poem and refers to events and people which may need some explanation. In a recent letter, Porter described the importance of the Spanish Civil War and his frame of mind during the composition of the poem:

To Americans of my generation — too young for W. W. I, too old, or almost so, for W. W. II — the great traumas of their formative years were the Depression and the Spanish Civil War. The Depression, indeed, had one of its culminations in the Spanish War, for Mussolini and Hitler used depressed economic conditions to get control of and establish tyrannies over their respective nations — tyrannies which they then attempted to extend to Ethiopia, Central Europe, Spain. . . . Anti-Fascists throughout the world desperately hoped that Spain would be the battlefield on which Fascism would be defeated. . . .

During my two years in Kansas, 1936-38, I lectured something like 19 times against the U. S. embargo on arms to Spain, wrote countless letters to newspapers, etc. At the time I wrote this poem — which was, indeed, at harvest time in the summer of 1938 — the war was in a crucial period, and, sleeping or waking, was uppermost in my mind.

Porter then goes on to explain the reference to Cedillo and Ziska:

Saturnino Cedillo was a Mexican caudillo who, probably at the instigation of U. S. oil interests, attempted to overthrow the legally elected but revolutionary government of Lazaro Cardenas but was speedily defeated. . . . Ziska was the great Bohemian Hussite leader who commanded peasant armies, armed with flails and employing armored farm-wagons as a sort of early tank, which again and again defeated the Imperialist forces in the 15th century.

The letter clarifies another obscure point: *chatos* are small pursuit planes sent by the Russians to combat the German planes that were assisting Franco. Porter's other poems make equally effective use of history to illustrate his belief in the endurance and heritage of Kansans. He has published little poetry in the years since *No Rain from These Clouds*, concentrating instead on scholarly research and writing, but has indicated that he may again become active as a poet.



DARK SAYING

In Kansas the farmers have raised so much wheat
that in some of their homes is nothing to eat.
Rest easy, food-gamblers, for you have not seen,
as have I, the dark corners where Winchesters lean.

No Rain from These Clouds (1946).

THE HAPPY FARMER

For Oscar Ameringer, 1870-1943

The fields are tangled gold; the bins are crowded to the
crown;
yards heaped with wheat at a price so low that it would
hardly pay
for seed and wages, interest, and hauling into town
(not to mention the farmer's labor), and dropping day by
day.

And on each bank-owned piffle-page
the editors give voice:
"The bumper wheat-crop of the age!--
Let farmers all rejoice!"

A farmer sits in choking dust on a bumping mowing-machine
to rend the withered stalk at the root and salvage the
shriveled seed,
hoping that he from his summer's toil may yet contrive to
glean
some pitiful shrunken bushels to use for chicken-feed.

And on each bank-owned swindle-sheet
The market-writers say:
"An end to farmers' whines!--for wheat
is ninety cents today!"

No Rain from These Clouds (1946).

THE LAST PRAIRIE-DOG TOWN

(Near Sterling, Kansas, 1932)

Here once was prairie-sod in places hollowed
by floundering of humped beasts with shaggy manes;
here was the buffalo-grass, here bison wallowed
before the plow and windmill took the plains.

The railroad came; the Indian and the reckless
plainsman in passing saw the bison pass;
and rainfilled pools became a broken necklace
of loosely-strung flat beads, dropped on the grass.

The bison came no more; the final pillage
of their bleached bones and dung was swept away.
Only a prairie-dog and ground-owl village
remained to call to mind a younger day.

But in mid-row farm-boys would stop their harrows
to watch the barking dive, the low brown flight,
perhaps to find the heads of Indian arrows,
dropped, it would seem, by passers in the night.

And from the plaza of that prairie-village
on misty mornings, one could sense the way
the country looked ere plains were drowned by tillage,
before there was a trail to Santa Fé.

*Was it good thrift this untamed sod should know
thralldom of tractor and of barbed-wire fence
that here a bankrupt farmer now might grow
low-grade eight-bushel wheat at thirty cents?*

The High Plains (1938).

QUIVIRA

I

(Near Lyons, Kansas, asserted to be the site of
Quivira, sought by Coronado)

Coronado, you came too soon
seeking those cities paved with gold.
Here as I stand in the blazing noon
of a Kansas day, there is unrolled
for level acres miles around
a fabric covering all the ground
with a knee-deep carpet of warm gold.
Coronado, the Kansas plain
that burned beneath your weary feet
required but the touch of some dusty grain
to change to a sea of ripening wheat
more precious both then and now that cold
paving-blocks of glittering gold.

II.

(In the Chase oil-fields, near Coronado's
Route, 1541)

Oil-derricks cluster where a Pawnee village
was briefly pitched four centuries ago;
in barbed-wire pastures set about with tillage
Jerseys usurp the place of buffalo.
Here passed the luckless Spaniards, in complete
discouragement at having found no cold
and precious ingots, while beneath their feet
lay passive floods of thick black liquid gold.

The High Plains (1938).

Here was no 'stern and rockbound coast,'
no 'forest primeval,'
no 'rocks and rills' nor 'woods and templed hills'
to love;
but an ocean of grass to the stirrups;
river 'half a mile wide and half an inch deep'--
or five miles by twenty feet
at the time of spring rains in the mountains;
hills were outcroppings of rock--
knobs on the backs of great saurians.
Here no romantic tradition-hallowed forest-dangers--
the tall dark brooding trees
leaning soul-crushingly inward;
the panther on the bough;
snuffle of wolves at the door-cranny:
instead
the horizon dragging outward at the heart-walls;
the land drought-crucified
(a wagon-master
wrists and ankles raw-hided to the prostrate spokes
careful Comanche fire on his navel);
the hosts of tiny vicious flying dragons;
the screaming down-rush of the white-hooded three-day
blizzard;
the ocean of grass a stormy sea of flame.
Many came to this land
and some stayed.
As for those who did not,
God grant that they found greener pastures.
As for those who dug in and survived,
their names are familiar to you,
are your own, in whole or in part,
the names of your children.

No Rain from These Clouds (1946).

THE LAND OF THE CRIPPLED SNAKE

The geographers have thrown a loop
north and south across the Great Plains,
a crippled snake —
tail at Lake Winnipeg,
crushed head near the mouth of the Rio Grande,
belly dragging
southwest across the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas,
south and southeast through Oklahoma, Texas,
by way of both Panhandles —
or maybe a length of discarded lariat,
dropped carelessly in the dust of a vast corral;
the geographers call it
“The Line of Semi-Aridity” —
which means that east there’s usually enough rain for a crop
and west there usually isn’t.
But you can’t depend on either.
Let a thrill of awakening life
run through the snake’s broken body,
let someone twitch idly at the frayed rope-end —
and farms west of the line are east;
again —
and farms that were east are west —
a game of skip-the-rope
in which a stumble is ruin. . . .

There are the High Plains,
the buffalo-lands
once matted with close curling grass
shaggy as the fell of the great beast
that grazed it and gave it a name —
shaggy beard mingling with the crisp grass,
drifting north or south with the grass in their thousands
till it seemed that the plain itself moved;
and on their flanks the naked hunters
feeding on the buffalo
as the buffalo
on the grass. . . .

From the east. . . .
the west. . . .
rapidly growing metal points
probing the continent's interior;
men in faded coats of blue or gray,
overalled Irish,
wide-straw-hatted Chinks —
their bodies going indistinguishably to iron
by chemistry of toil.
A grid of metal spanned the continent,
pushing apart the tribes,
the herds,
and along the bars
rushed hooting, puffing black monsters.
Buffalo, hunter,
alarmed by the smoke and the thunder,
stung by the Winchester-hail,
drifted north,
drifted south,
drifted west,
and across the horizon of time. . . .

But the grass did not long cure ungrazed.
Rattle of hooves,
snorting of thirst-reddened nostrils,
creak of leather,
yells and songs —
“Whoopee-ti-yi-yo! Get along little dogies! . . .”
“With my feet in the stirrups and my seat in the saddle
I go ridin' around these god-dam cattle —
Ti-yi-yippy-you-ya-ay! Ti-yi-yippy-you-yay!” —
the long horns,
the Texans,
surging north to Abilene, Ellsworth, Newton,
Wichita, Dodge City,
north and north to Ogallala and Cheyenne. . . .
and from the east the covered wagons,
the immigrant-trains —
the “nesters” with their plows,
following a rainbow —
the promise of rain.

Burrows in the hillside
beside the dens of coyote and badger;
oxen and horses moving
under the immense unbroken sky
slitting long thongs from the shaggy hide of the plain,
turning raw side up to cure under the sun.
A new green —
of sod-corn, of wheat;
grain heaped on the ground,
grain shoveled into stoves in blizzard-wrapped soddies,
covered wagons flaunting the slogan
“Kansas or Bust”
rolling — immense immigrating boulders,
schooners with canvas furled —
onto the plains
over which the belly of the crippled snake has twitched,
the lariat idly swung,
westward.

No Rain From These Clouds (1946).

For Donald Henry (Dodge City, pre-medic, University of Kansas), first-aid man, mortally wounded, Belchite, Sept. 2, 1937; Ray Jackson, Jr. (Syracuse), missing, Gandesa, Apr. 1, 1938; also: James Cleveland Hill (ex-U.S. soldier; Ness City oilworker), lieutenant, killed in action, Corbera, Sept. 9, 1938; Kenneth Graeber (Lawrence, student of journalism, University of Kansas), ambulance-driver, honorably discharged; Paul O'Dell (Wichita, worker and student), infantry and engineers, honorably discharged; for all Jayhawkers of the Lincoln-Washington Battalion, in the body or out of the body.

Half-waking in the day-coach east from Denver
an elevator named the town. A month
before my low-keyed mind might momentarily
have drifted down associative pathways:

“... Sicilian city, Athens' great misfortune. . . .

town in New York where once I spent a month
slapping the dust from documents century-old . . .”

as well, of course, as: “. . . western Kansas village —
home of the Negro who answered instructor's compliments
on his Spanish accent by reference to the doubly
fortunate presence in town of a Mexican barber. . . .”

A month ago. . . .

But now

Syracuse is a name:

Ray Jackson. . . .

The wheatfields were a heliograph. The porter
passed through the car with his warning. “. . . twenty-five
minutes. . . .”

Till the zero-hour? No, time allowed for breakfast.

What did I think of, leaving the train a year
ago? Boot Hill and Wyatt Earp. . . .

the heaps of buffalo-hides in the 1870's —
bones in the decade after. . . .

a college-girl who named this town as hers. . . .

But now

forever

Dodge City is

Don Henry. . . .

O prairie-village,
your houses hiding among the wheatfields —
prairie-chickens in bunch-grass —
only your grain-elevator against the sky,
a giant metallic gopher;

O prairie-towns
insulated by ocean and 2,000 miles of complacency —
blubber of wood-pulp, of celluloid-reels, and of air waves —
against the fierce currents of death that are crackling through
Europe,
what voice pierced deliberate static and ear-plugs to call
your sons from these plains to the fight on the Spanish *meseta*?

*Young men, with their minds sharpened pitchforks, tore
through the foul tangle
of lies, sheathing bales of horstpapers heaved off at the stations,
as threshers strip off the tough mildew from wheatstacks to
come
at the last to the good central grain of the truth.*

These men were Americans — blood of America's heart —
their names say "America":

1776

the long Decherd rifle

Donald Henry

Ray Jackson

They were Kansans

their schoolbooks had not yet forgotten

John Brown

They were men from the wheatfields

Spain was a furious sun which drew them along paths of light
as the water ascends from the trickle through sand, from the
buffalo-wallow,

to swoop like a billion bright *chatos* which speed to relief
of the drought-besieged fields.

Theirs too was a lean and stubborn land.

For five years it had known

the dictatorship of the drought, the blackshirted dust-storm. . . .

the dust still swirls in a gas-cloud,

heads have fallen. . . .

but the lines hold. . . .

irrigation-canals have brought up reinforcements. . . .

No pasaran!

Life which lay seemingly buried has broken the darkness
(the stones of their prisons shall split) and the germs which
today
still hide underground shall next season leap forth with a
shout —
or, dying, enrich with their spirit the soil for their
comrades. . . .

Pasaremos!

Cedillo is in flight, and Chamberlain
teeters goutily, the spirit of
Ziska's flail-wielding peasants in armored farm-wagons
patrols the Czech frontiers,
about Addis Ababa the Ethiopians
cut roads, lie in the brush, and wait for the rains
to ground the Fascist planes,
trucks in continuous caravan are rushing
the new combines to the fields of the west, and wheat
pours into Dodge City and Syracuse bins (but O where
are the bullets, the guns, and the planes for the wheatfields
of Spain?);
at Valencia the comrades
feet on the earth are shouldering the sky. . . .

If a Spanish trench gashes a ripened wheatfield with gigantic
and sterile furrow
there are men who are rubbing the heads between powder-
black palms
men who winnow the kernels with battle-hot breath, and
who wonder
about the Three A's, the FU, and about yields per acre,
weight per bushel, and protein-content — above all, the price —
of wheat at the Dodge City co-ops. . . .

*John Brown of Kansas still goes marching on —
his tread is on the plains of Aragon!*

No Rain From These Clouds (1946).

DUST-BOWL FARMER

A two weeks' stubble was on his chin,
His overalls were worn and old
His hands were hands of toil.
He had seen the scourging dust
Destroy his greening wheat, and now
His fields stretch to the sky,
A barren waste.

But in his veins the blood of sturdy pioneers
Ran cool,
And he, seasoned by the endless wind,
The blazing sun, the drought, the lonely plains,
Looked at the ground and said,
"I aim to try again."

Dust —and Stardust (1955).

KANSAS PIONEERS

"When we came to Kansas," grandfather said,
"I built us a cabin and chinked it tight,
There was oak and hickory for our fires,
And a good, cold spring near the cabin site."
Said grandma, "The wolves would howl at night."

"I shot plenty of deer," he reminisced,
"And prairie chickens were thick as hops;
Fish in the crick and squirrels in the woods,
So we didn't depend alone on crops."
She sighed, "We were miles and miles from shops."

"I broke the sod for some corn and wheat
But grasshoppers plagued and dry years came;
Some folks packed up and they went back East,"
Said he, "but we stayed and proved our claim."
Said she, "All alone when my first child came."

Kansas Magazine (1955).

DUST STORM

This is a devil cloud; no needed rain
For thirsty fields is in its murky folds.
Strong, angry winds that vacuum-swept the plain
Now empty silt the rolling dust-bin holds.

The farmer, facing doom, protects his stock,
Then makes his bitter way from barn to house;
His tight-lipped wife stuffs window-cracks that mock
The tidy ways that women-folk espouse.

They light the lamp, noon but an hour away,
And sit in silence, stricken past all speech.
His instinct is to curse and hers to pray,
Security no longer within reach.

Kansas City Star (March 8, 1954).

THE OLD SETTLER

A gingham bonnet shades her wrinkled face,
Which bends above the new-plowed soil,
The years have stolen all her girlhood grace
And marred her hands with grimy toil;
But she still loves the changing moods of earth
That answer to her soul's deep needs--
Her eyes behold the miracle of birth
In each Spring's planting of new seeds.

The neighbors think she is too old to hoe--
Too old to plant her garden plot;
But when the first March winds begin to blow
They see her slowly rake the lot.
Each year she plants the crooked rows again
With hands grown feebler than before
While her dim eyes scan western skies for rain
Just as they did in 'eighty four.

Kansas Authors' Club Yearbook for 1947.

KANSAS FARMER

His face was weathered like the calf-hide hung on a nail
In the barn, tanned by wind, sun, rain.

His eyes owned a slit of that sun like brown hickories
Which go to something good beyond the shell.

His fluid lips moved as a mottled grass snake, warm
To sun or hoof, way in the winter wheat.

His brown body was like the time-pocked creosote post
Telling his lower forty, short but firm.

His talk was plain as prairie lifting to the lean
Of sky. He was a kernel of Indian corn,
Sucked long in the mouth of every wind,
When spit would sprout in any soil to green.

Kansas Magazine (1966).

OUT OF THE DREAMING DUST

An ocean shell in bas-relief on stone,
A rusted link from Spanish coat-of-mail,
An arrow-head of flint, a red-man's bone
Are fragments of the legendary tale
Told by the Kansas hills. Here one may find
Depressions stamped by hooves of buffalo
Around a salt lick. Here the faint trails wind
Where wagon wheels rolled westward long ago.

Some wagons stopped; the stout, land-hungry heart
Saw promise in the vast and vital plains.
These were our fathers, these a breed apart.
Kansans! whose blood still quickens in our veins.
They built an empire on a sea of grass,
Where village, field and mart and singing stream
Attest the miracle they brought to pass:
Out of the dreaming dust, a living dream.

Kansas Library Bulletin (September 1961).

SECTION V

A SENSE OF THE PAST

1960-1978



From the Wichita Eagle-Beacon.

Contemporary poets who write about Kansas place little emphasis on specific historical events, although a sense of the past is important to them. While earlier poets focused on the social, political, and economic ideas of the time and on the effect Kansans had on the land (the creation of a farming empire from a desert wilderness), today's poets seem to be primarily concerned with the effect the landscape has on them personally — the moods, experiences, attitudes, and images the land and sky evoke within.

While there are often moments of humor and wonder in the work of William Stafford, Harley Elliott, W. R. Moses, and others, the most common response to the Kansas landscape seems to be a sense of loss caused by an awareness of the passage of time and its effect on the environment and traditions of the state. Sometimes this is readily evident, as in Stafford's "Prairie Town," Moses' "Position: Oregon Trail," and Irby's "To Max Douglas"; more often it is implied through the tone of the poetry or in the juxtaposition of certain images which usually relate the alteration of the prairie environment to an internal or spiritual displacement within the poet. For many poets, there seems to be no cohesion, no clear linkage between past and present. The old myths and old symbols, the once unbroken prairie — now fenced and cultivated — no longer exert their former power.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* there is a compelling description of how the "fresh green breast of the new world" must have first appeared to Europeans:

for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

The written testimony of many pioneers indicates that their first confrontation with the prairie caused a similar reaction. Today that "transitory enchanted moment" of "aesthetic contemplation" is realized in Kansas poetry only when the poet looks back and imaginatively recreates an earlier time. In this sense, the pastoral myth and the pioneering urge to seek out new territory are still operative forces, but no virgin land remains and modern life provides scant hope for the realization of the pastoral ideal. Thus, the last frontier, the new virgin land, has to be within; it is imagination and sensitivity — his own as well as his readers' — that the contemporary poet must cultivate. The link to the past lies in the awareness of that past and in the imaginative recreation of it so that it becomes meaningful.

Contemporary poets evoke the past and connect it to the present in different ways. Elmer Suderman writes of his Mennonite heritage and the obstacles faced by his ancestors as they struggled to settle the state. W. R. Moses, in poems like "Place Considered as a Time Factor" and "Position: Oregon Trail" extols the enduring quality of the land and its ability to withstand and even eradicate the marks of man. Moses seems wryly amused that many people are unaware of the transience of their efforts to possess and shape the land. In the same vein, Ronald Johnson's "Quivira" indicates that few have understood the Kansas prairie; Coronado failed to comprehend the meaning of the Quivirans when they told him that "the things/where you are now/are of great importance." This failure in understanding and the resultant human and ecological tragedies are the subjects of poems by Harley Elliott, Robert Killoren, and Victor Contoski. In "Finding the Buffalo," "At the Grave of a Young Pioneer Girl Nearby the Oregon Trail in Eastern Kansas," and "Moonlit Night in Kansas," slaughtered herds of buffalo, the graves of pioneers, and vanished Indian tribes are used as symbols of man's attempt to conquer and transform the prairie.

Unlike the poets mentioned above, William Stafford rarely deals with Kansas history; rather, he writes about his memories of growing up in the state. There is an almost mystical aura in Stafford's poetry that seems to come from his sense of the subtle but powerful influence of the land and sky. This awareness of the forceful landscape is present in "One Home" ("Wherever we looked the land would hold us up"), in "Prairie Town" ("A wealth of sun and wind ever so strong"), in "Universe Is One Place" ("Sky is home, universe is one place"), and in "The Peters Family" ("miles told the sunset that Kansas/would hardly ever end").

Many of Harley Elliott's Kansas poems contain a magical landscape similar to Stafford's. One of the differences between the two poets is that Elliott does not usually reminisce about an earlier period of his life. "Butterflies & Coyote," with its images of "the green wheat sea" and "a choice of dreams . . . to answer the call of lonely dreamers everywhere," shows Elliott's awareness that "transitory moments of enchantment" are possible on the prairie.

Of the poems in this section, those of Ken Irby are perhaps the most difficult to read and understand. His style is highly personal and dense with references that may puzzle many readers. Throughout his poetry, he connects perceptions of the present with pieces of his own past and fragments of history. With Irby, Kansas is a constant presence; he does not write specifically about the state, but its influence is nearly always evident, as Ed Dorn's introduction to *To Max Douglas* makes clear:

Fixation. Irby has bisontine habits. No matter how far his body wanders, He never wanders. It is the endless rumination of the Big Vegetarians. It is this vaster length of service to the best earth ideas which gives nobility to the vegetarians. The habit is integral: the waving carpet of grass and the volition to movement are the same

I asked an astute fellow-poet recently what one might discern about such work, frankly calling to any external markers. And the answer came that Irby had Stayed. Stayed with the materia.

Irby's clarity of vision and ability to create new insights by synthesizing strings of disparate images and references make his work important and valuable despite its difficulty.

Perhaps because contemporary poems about Kansas are often based largely on personal experience and observation, they are a diverse group. Kansas is, now more than before, in the eye of the beholder; the unifying forces of previous periods, like the Puritan myth, are virtually nonexistent. The pastoral ideal and the pioneer spirit may influence a poet's perception of the state, but do not wholly determine that perception. Poets are attuned to their own shifting attitudes toward the landscape just as they are more sensitive and receptive to it, as these lines by Ken Irby from "The Grasslands of North America" indicate:

That same country as entered
the first time it was ever seen

is entered again and again
each time I come to it
as I came here at three
out of Texas

was the New World

Kansas is constantly being imaginatively created by poets. Their visions differ, but nearly all of them speak of something that does seem to exist in the state. These lines from a section of Ronald Johnson's "Letters to Walt Whitman" in *The Valley of Many-colored Grasses* eloquently describe the multiplicity of available realities in Kansas:

*Landscapes projected masculine,
full-sized and golden . . .
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent,
sinking sun, burning, expanding the air.*

But are these landscapes to be imagined,
or an actual
Kansas — the central, earthy, prosaic core of us?
Or is the seen always winged, an *eidolon* only to us — &
never
the uncertain capture
of great, golden, unembroidered
slabs?

All is Oz.
The dusty cottonwoods, by the creek,
rustle an Emerald City.

And the mystic, immemorial city
is rooted in earth.

All is Oz & inextricable,
bound up in the unquenchable flames of double suns.

The imaginative capacities of the state's poets have proven to be as fertile as
its fabled wheatlands; the harvest enriches us all.

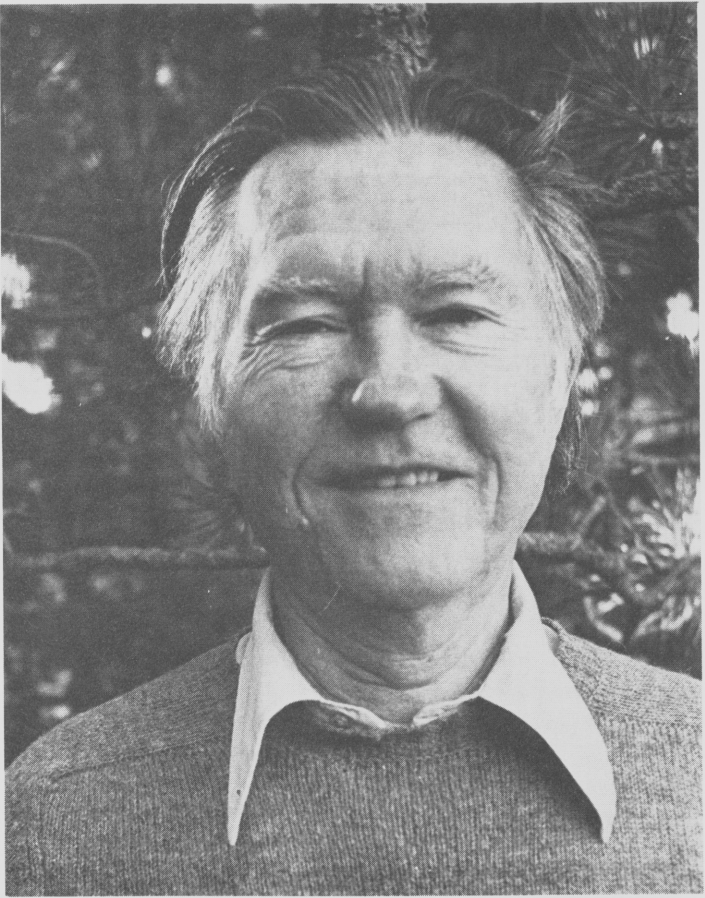


Photo by Barbara Stafford

WILLIAM STAFFORD (1914-) b. Hutchinson, Kansas

Stafford attended the University of Kansas, earning degrees in 1937 and 1946 before receiving his doctorate from Iowa State University and joining the faculty of Lewis and Clark in Oregon. Stafford won the William H. Carruth award for poetry in 1941, but the first volume of his work *West of Your City* (1960) did not appear for nearly two decades. His latest work, *Stories That Could Be True* (1977) contains new poems as well as all those published in his five earlier volumes. Stafford is in much demand today as a lecturer and reader.

ONE HOME

Mine was a Midwestern home--you can keep your world.
Plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.
We sang hymns in the house; the roof was near God.

The light bulb that hung in the pantry made a wan light,
but we could read by it the names of preserves--
outside, the buffalo grass, and the wind in the night.

A wildcat sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July
when he was cutting plum bushes for fuel,
before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky.

To anyone who looked at us we said, "My friend";
liking the cut of a thought, we could say "Hello."
(But plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.)

The sun was over our town; it was like a blade.
Kicking cottonwood leaves we ran toward storms.
Wherever we looked the land would hold us up.

West of Your City (1960).

THE PETERS FAMILY

At the end of their ragged field
a new field began:
miles told the sunset that Kansas
would hardly ever end,
and that beyond the Cimarron crossing
and after the row-crop land
a lake would surprise the country
and sag with a million birds.

You couldn't analyze those people —
a no-pattern had happened to them:
their field opened and opened,
level, and more, then forever,
never crossed. Their world went everywhere.

Traveling Through the Dark (1962).



M. H. Foss House. Photo from J. J. Pennell Collection courtesy of the Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries.

PRAIRIE TOWN

There was a river under First and Main;
the salt mines honeycombed farther down.
A wealth of sun and wind ever so strong
converged on that home town, long gone.

At the north edge there were the sandhills.
I used to stare for hours at prairie dogs,
which had their town, and folded their little paws
to stare beyond their fence where I was.

River rolling in secret, salt mines with care
holding your crystals and stillness, north prairie--
what kind of trip can I make, with what old friend,
ever to find a town so widely rich again?

Pioneers, for whom history was walking through dead grass,
and the main things that happened were miles and the time of day--
you built that town, and I have let it pass.
Little folded paws, judge me: I came away.

Traveling Through the Dark (1962).

UNIVERSE IS ONE PLACE

Crisis they call it?--when
when the gentle wheat leans at the combine and
and the farm girl brings cool jugs wrapped in burlap
slapping at her legs?

We think--drinking cold water
water looking at the sky--
Sky is home, universe is one place.

Crisis? City folks make

Make such a stir.
Farm girl away through the wheat.

Traveling Through the Dark (1962).

THE FARM ON THE GREAT PLAINS

A telephone line goes cold;
birds tread it wherever it goes.
A farm back of a great plain
tugs an end of the line.

I call that farm every year,
ringing it, listening, still;
no one is home at the farm,
the line gives only a hum.

Some year I will ring the line
on a night at last the right one,
and with an eye tapered for braille
from the phone on the wall

I will see the tenant who waits —
the last one left at the place;
through the dark my braille eye
will lovingly touch his face.

“Hello, is Mother at home?”

No one is home today.

“But Father — he should be there.”

No one — no one is here.

“But you — are you the one . . . ?”

Then the line will be gone
because both ends will be home:
no space, no birds, no farm.

My self will be the plain,
wise as winter is gray,
pure as cold posts go
pacing toward what I know.

West of Your City (1960).

AL DEWEY (1947-) b. Garden City, Kansas

A 1972 graduate of the University of Kansas, Dewey is presently the assistant director of Nunemaker College at K.U. His poetry has appeared in many magazines, including the *Kansas Quarterly* and the *New York Quarterly*, and in several anthologies, including *Heartland II*.

COLBY EXIT

Tumbleweeds blow
through streets at night
illuminated by fluorescent lights;
Pacific Intermountain
and Red Ball
throb into stillness
on the interstate
one mile away.
Then, between sounds of diesels
rise strains, almost silent —
crops singing
across the Kansas flats.

Kansas Quarterly (Summer 1970).

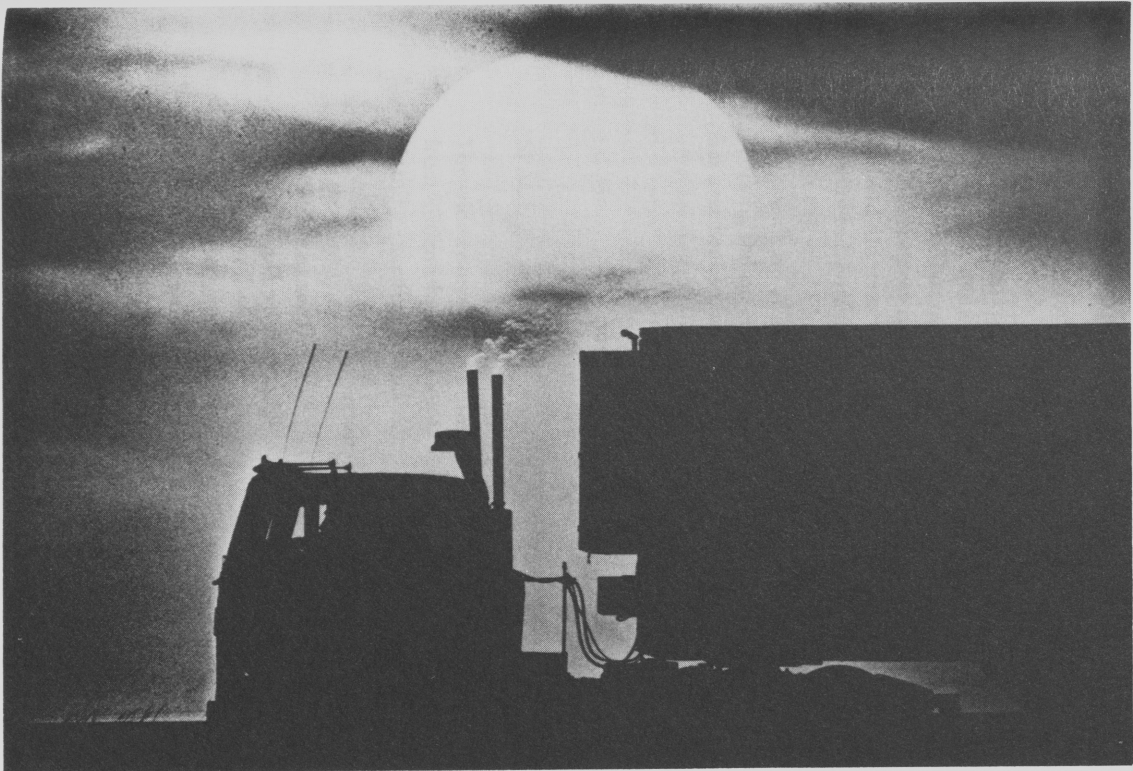


Photo courtesy of the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*.

The majority of Suderman's poems, especially those in *What Can We Do Here?* (1974), reflect the fact that he is a descendent of one of the first Mennonites to settle in Kansas.

I SIT WITH MENNONITES

Wrapped in wheat fields, space
and sun,
I sit with Mennonites, straight-backed
and spare,
in a rural Kansas church,
wheat,
grain elevators, barb-wire fences,
hedge rows
the only landmarks rising out of the floor
of an old sea.
Silence hits the clear church
windows,
silence older than prairie before it
became wheat,
before prairie was sea:
Mennonites,
wheat, space, and sun still taciturn
company.

What Can We Do Here? (1974).

WHAT CAN WE DO HERE?

What can we do here
on this undulating rolling endless
weary buffalo grass
where sun and sky are one,
space the final fact
evading our eye's need
to measure and record
the distance and location of things?
Who will tell us our name
here where even dreams lose their shape
and sod drags us through hard days
bewildered, confused?
What can we do but walk,
walk, walk on and on
breaking sod no man
has ever broken before?

What Can We Do Here? (1974).

SPACE

The wide country was nothing
from horizon to horizon.
Nothing except grass and sky
and clouds and rain and time
and monotony only the air filled.
We could not see far
enough
to see the end of space or time.
Except on clear nights
we could not tell where north was
until we fenced the land
with olive orange,
hedge rows, that enclosed nothing
and nothing became something,
became land, our land,
ours to break the sod, and harrow
and plant and harvest
Turkey Red hard winter wheat.

What Can We Do Here? (1974).

Johnson won the Boar's Head Prize for Poetry while attending Columbia University and later received the Boulton Award for poetry. He has been working on epic poems in recent years and no longer writes about Kansas. His present home is San Francisco.

QUIVIRA

I

Also reputed to be golden, Quivira:

Cibola, unknown
to Coronado, meant 'buffalo'

to the Indians, but onward, to El Dorado, 'The Gilded One',

a country where
boats were incrustated with gold, where
golden bells hung from trees

(though the food there,

said to be served on gold,

was buffalo).

'We took the hump from both sides of the hump ribs, of all the carcasses. In taking out the hump we inserted the knife at the coupling of the loin, cutting forward down the lower side, as far forward as the perpendicular ribs ran; then, starting at the loin again, would cut down the upper side, thus taking out a strip from a full-grown animal about three feet long. Near the front of the hump ribs it would be ten or twelve inches wide & four or five inches thick. When first taken out it was hung up for a couple of days with the big end down. It became shrunken, tender & brittle, with no taint. The front end had a streak of lean alternating with fat & when fried in tallow, made a feast for the gods.'

The prairie soil was 'black & fat' &
according to Castaneda, the marrow of the land.

On that soil, later to be stripped
for prairie sod-houses,
wild turkeys
flocked among the persimmons
their flesh succulent from golden sand plums,
bitter
with china-berries.
The coyotes,
their eyes aglow on the dark horizon, barked at a moon
above the lowing
of buffalo, heard twenty miles
away.
And cottonwood trees, from whose buds
the Indians
made clear yellow, scattered their drift in spring
filling the gullies.

The Quivirans
were to tell Coronado
'the things
where you are now
are of great importance.'

II

As Coronado turned to retrace his steps,
the Smoky Hills were visible north across a stream
enveloped in an atmospheric haze
in which the hills
became distant, impossible mountains--
'where you are now'
the Indians had said, 'of great
importance'.

The country they traveled over
was so level,
if one looked at the buffalo
the sky could be seen between their legs,
so that at a distance they appeared
to be smooth-trunked pines whose tops jointed--
& if there was
one bull, it seemed four
pines.

The country was round, as if
a man should imagine himself in a bowl, & could see sky
at its edge
an arrow's shot away.
And if any man
were to lie down on his back, he lost
sight
of the ground.

Did Coronado see also in that late summer storm,
before he turned south,
an horizon of dark funnels tapering
toward the earth, coming with the thunderous sound of a
buffalo herd
out of the plains--a calm & sulphurous air
in which clouds were drawn like lightning toward the funnels--
scattering his men
to hide among grassy hollows?

A tornado against the sky
like buffalo
who were bearded as
goats,
with the hump of a camel, the mane
of a lion
& who carried
their tails erect as they ran,
like any European
scorpion.

O Coronado, all country
is round to

those who lose sight of the
ground.

Canceas, Cansez, Kansies, Konza: the Indian word
meaning smoky,

from an atmospheric condition
in the fall of the year, called

Indian Summer:

smoke in the air,

in Quivira.

A Line of Poetry, a Row of Trees (1964).



A sixteenth-century French sketch of a buffalo.

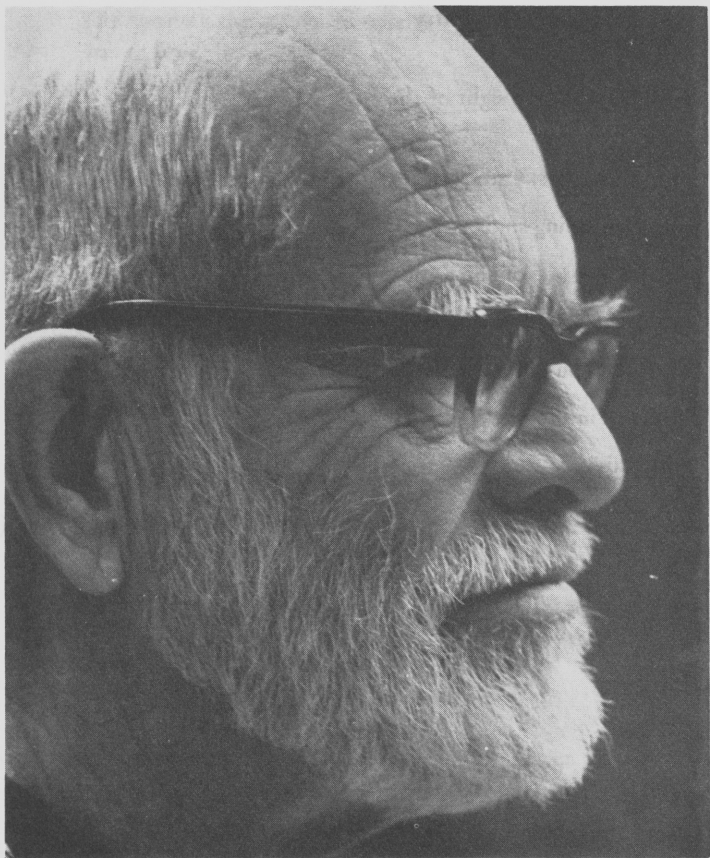


Photo by William Stafford

W. R. MOSES (1911-) b. Alexandria, Minnesota

Moses has been a resident of Kansas since 1950, when he joined the faculty at Kansas State University. Although not a native Kansan, Moses has a poetic style that exemplifies a certain element in the state's character. Most of Moses' poems are narratives, with the author speaking directly to the reader. His tone is generally one of wry humor tinged with a gentle pessimism born from experience. Moses' poems seem to have been written by a weather-beaten Kansas farmer who is wise to the ways of the world, toughened by toil and adversity, yet full of compassion and understanding.

BIG DAM

Muddy meek river, oh, it was splendid sport
Those times you tore apart tranquility
And swam the gar through frightened village streets
(And sent the villagers to live in tents)
And spread your silted bed on every sort
Of floor, and rammed prairie at the sea —
But where, do you think, is the end of suchlike feats?
Good Lord, did you never hear of consequence?

Look, do you see your wedge of tumult spread?
Words rage like water, and all Congress frowns,
And tit for tat, and the world witnesses
You shall be damned and dammed for tumult's sake —
And swim the carp above the milking shed
(And send the farmers off to live in towns)
And try if cedars can be cypresses
And lose the arid prairie in a lake.

—As for me, I limit my claim hereabout
To a handful of berries (wild) from the thorny bank;
Yet the heart turns a little at seeing wreckage.
Though algae thicken in calm on shallowing stones
And an innocent babyhood of willows sprout
Fishbone-thick on the bar's widening flank —
See, in the under bend, a huge flung breakage
Of bone-white cottonwood boles, white as old bones.

Identities (1965).

PLACE CONSIDERED AS A TIME FACTOR

Close under bluff, in the insignificant talus
That wind, frost, or the prairie rains have tumbled
To the muddy edge of a prairie creek's trickle,
Plant your feet firmly; look up. You cannot traject
Your sight at right angles; hence you will see no trace
Of the fat new houses affronting the territory
A little back from the edge. There is only the twisting
Line of wild grass, wind-shaken, transected thrice
By wind-gnawed cedars and a broken burr oak torn
By wind. And the prairie sky, intense and timeless.

That is the setting; nothing about it has changed
Since the last morning a wandering bison came
To the edge to look down. Stare hard; confront him.
The big brown head, the massive oval, is calm
In knowledge that nothing in the world calls for caution
But a few weak arrows, and certain wolves and coyotes.
His beard hangs heavy; there is wind in his brown curls.

Identities (1965).

LILIES

In a strip of old prairie, paradoxically spared
For lying close beside a destructive agent
Of prairies, a railway, I remember one could in season
Go hunting lilies. Of course not the over-scented,
Under-colored domestic lilies that speak
From funeral houses and altars of death and resurrection.
Rather, wild tiger lilies, low-scented, high-colored,
With petals recurved like snarls, black-spotted on orange.
One time I saw them leaning over the bones
Of (possibly) a prairie chicken caught on her nest by fire.
They seemed a right tribute to honor a wild death.
As for resurrection — they nodded in the prairie wind.

Identities (1965).

POSITION: OREGON TRAIL

Except beneath the blur of a winter sky,
Where in the name of measurement am I
(We know ourselves, we live, by measurement)
This edgeless day? Oh, a knoll and a swale
North of the Oregon Trail.

Let me go south, then, a swale and a knoll
Over wearily tawny grass, where bushes thole
In the indeterminate purple of the season,
And make a considering stop. But my eyes fail
To find the Oregon Trail.

Paveless trace, it is merged with the ground and gone.
A dozen such could fade in the life of a man.
(That mark no wheel rut — only the run of rabbits.)
My cast for placement is spoiled; the years prevail
Over the Oregon Trail.

But not, possibly, over the softling hills
Nuzzling into the greyness the sky spills
(They do look worn; to flint-men they looked the same)
There yonder? With no such sneer shall time assail
Them as the Oregon Trail.

Wait. The lightest wind that can bend a shoot
Is weapon enough; the scrape of a coyote's foot.
There needs no catastrophe that breaks all measure.
They shall be sent by the drag of a mouse's tail
To join the Oregon Trail.

All hesitancy of color and line today
Is a view of time carrying place away.
(How do I look, I wonder, in my own blotched khaki?)
In the sprawl of winter, there's no help hearing a tale
About the Oregon Trail.

Identities (1965).

AT THE GRAVE OF A YOUNG PIONEER
GIRL NEARBY THE OREGON TRAIL
IN EASTERN KANSAS

a ceremony
of small stones
on the tip of the
plateau overlooking the
kaw valley cities
hundreds of miles distant
can be seen at night
topeka kansas city
omaha wamego
manhattan
wichita
a full circle

Rising Out of the Flint Hills (1972).

Irby grew up in Fort Scott, Kansas, and attended the University of Kansas, the University of California at Berkeley, and Harvard University. He has had several books of poetry published, including *To Max Douglas* (1974) and *Catalpa* (1977). He now lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

From
TO MAX DOUGLAS

Where that leads, Ed Howe
at Atchison, leaning onto
a newspaper on bowled hills
above the river, thinks back
to St Joe and past and writes *The Story
of a Country Town*, not Kansas Ed
Grier said, but NW Missouri, a
completely different country, first
novel from the heartland
to reach East and make them
waggle, "Ours", was the
deep clarity, "Ours
was the prairie district our West
where we had gone to grow up
with the country", traces
of Lewis and Clark arc
between, their true portal
would be White Cloud, duped
ruined sooners, even
Iowa Point, if still
the wonder is, Max, did you cross
it first, going down to Lawrence
or was it Atchison, or as far
as Kansas City before you entered
the Bloody Land?

⊕
Lincoln came to Kansas once
Dec 1859, Elwood, Troy, Atchison
spoke from the hotel steps in already long
decadent Leavenworth

looking back
across the river to far
certain Washington, the day John Brown
was hanged for Harper's Ferry
one
of the crew of good *Reuben James*
was from Troy

⊕
And Cy Leland
from the fabled towers of Ilium
ruled the state
for 40 years

⊕
Cy Leland
was all mastery
the closest poetry
stayed to that in Kansas
was Ironquill Ware
whose poetry "stinks"
said Malin, "yes, it stinks"
the smell was in my adolescent nose
I knew who lived in his old house
3 blocks down on my street
flapdoodle jingo verse, cut East to be
Commissioner of Pensions, wet
his wit flits yet above

some lunchcounter present
avatar of that high interview

the point is, *exiles*
and to reach from that, from your

St Joe to present Lawrence
is a cut as far

and continental as the reach
to California

you were crossing South of the Pony Express
North of the Santa Fe trail, askew

from the Oregon utterly and at
right angles to Lewis and Clark

in your *head*, poor
lost Missouri Max, McClure

was born in Marysville
you were still

in the whirlpool of the continent

.



“this is no
Road to Paradise”

looking, as you always
seemed to, West over the river

into Kansas, or along the Missouri shore
going that way —South

and West — the plat of settlement
is instantly more open

thataway — on the road map
all the mycelium mat of roads

stays in Missouri, East, behind the head
behind the eyes, before the river

the shift of more than half a century
from Thomson in Kansas City, looking East

indeed to Paree, and with the
Southern lees distrustful

of the Kansas freaks and spreeds
of peanutbutter pie

border people are always strange
river people even more so

together, not just *unease*
of *edge*, but watery

deep inland introspection
subject to sudden inundation

and heavy mud, the boundary between
Kansas and Missouri is a zone

as violent of movement
as the San Andreas Fault

John Brown is still not a casual visitor
Border Ruffians still

wait above the flood plain
their clodhopper boot gunked with mud

stockpiling homemade shotguns
clubs and bombs, the high febrile

acid gorge rising in the blood
to break wide open this new *day*

the bright wild *blood* time coming, Quantrill
still waits to raid Lawrence, only from

within this time, the *rise*
is high tide *here* already

hard at hand



The woods around Osawatomie
are as wild, the thickets

on Potawatomie Creek just
as dense and matted beard

as John Brown's sons' farms
John Brown's grimeyed cutlass *hacking* massacre

a hundred years? anyone with sense would *still*
be scared *shitless* to go out there on foot at night

high, and knowing
what we do?

the underground railway now
is dope not slaves, runaways

of revolution, nutcrackers, unshacklers
of deep spirits

the dark gods
wait in the blooded underground

their visage is more shapeless
and more terrible than ever

To Max Douglas (second enlarged edition, 1974).

THE GRASSLANDS OF NORTH AMERICA

for Bob Grenier

Only a succession of far-reaching green prairies
the grass that is in
my backyard

As we moved down the hill in the grass
looking past the highway toward Hammond
our pants and legs caught thick in it
the same winds blowing

Where Pike entered Kansas
and drunk after drunk in highschool
we ended, the piss in the clover
the smell of clover so strong for miles
we stopped the car and got out
drunk in the roadway

That same country as entered
the first time it was ever seen

is entered again and again
each time I come to it
as I came here at three
out of Texas

was the New World

There must be in the juice
and flesh a same plain
as these, the same moving
wave as this grass

the body comes back to
only having heard as they
only heard, by hearsay
and believed it

Catalpa (1977).

Although not a native Kansan (he grew up in Minnesota, attended the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin, and lived for three years in Poland), Contoski has written a number of poems about the state and is currently working on a series of poems tentatively entitled *Prairie Wind: A Kansas Sequence*, which will include "Moonlit Night in Kansas" and "Journey West." In addition to being a prolific poet, he teaches creative writing and American literature at the University of Kansas.

MOONLIT NIGHT IN KANSAS

The plains of Kansas stretch out
under the moon like a sheet of music.

Buffalo lie bleeding in the grass.
The sound of their panting
rolls along the Kaw River
like the beat of a ghostly tom-tom.

Arcturus descends
andante molto cantabile.

The sons of the homesteaders
have migrated to Asia.

Their daughters went east
to enter the Miss America Pageant
and were never heard from again.

An old Indian recites
meaningless words:
Topeka, Manhattan, Wichita.

Broken Treaties (1973).

JOURNEY WEST

Whoever travels into Kansas
exploring the great American desert
goes out into space
into the interstellar distances
between the lights of the prairie farms.

Suddenly his hair turns white
and he rejoices in his age.

The wind touches his face
like a wrinkled wife
who loves him

and grain moves at his feet
like grandchildren.

At sunset
in the hymn of the locusts
he hears
voices of dead Indians

and feels buffalo hooves
in his heartbeats.

Whoever leaves Westport
journeys past Council Grove
and Bent's Fort
into the unknown

Where he shall find the past
waiting in ambush
like Arapahoe and Kiowa.

Stricken
he shall fall
headlong among the stars

and lie with dead
at Pottawatomie
Marais de Cygnes
and Lawrence.

He shall lie with Jedediah Smith
and the Kansa Indians.

And he shall be home.

Ark River Review (1977).

Elliott teaches art at Marymount College in Salina, Kansas, but he has also found time to be very active as a poet. Several volumes of his work have been published in recent years, including *All Beautyfull & Foolish Souls* (1974), *Sky Heart* (1975), and *Animals That Stand In Dreams*. His poetry varies considerably in mood — from anger (“Finding the Buffalo”) to wonder and amazement (“Butterflies & Coyote”) — and is nearly always strikingly original and memorable.

PRAIRIE LIGHT

Walking through
the prairie light

you are always with
that freshly pleased look

one side struck
a deep afternoon gold.

Everything stops
except your body

rubbing itself
across the fields
in lazy regard.

Sky Heart (1975).

FINDING THE BUFFALO

After the sea of curly humps
after the cairns of historical skulls
raised on the dry land

after the last bone
died in your machines

the brown bucolic eye of the buffalo
remained floating blind
in the caves of the earth.

We are massing
on the underside of light
beyond the sweat and flies
wagonloads of hump uprooted tongue
the last skins dry in dark museums.

Lose your eyes
and you see us all the night herds
dark blue beasts

woolly canyons of buffalo running
certain as the midnight
blood that holds you back.

We are the moving forest
the divine thunder
heading straight for your skull.

Animals That Stand in Dreams.

BUTTERFLIES & COYOTE

We are driving through
the butterflies of the world
all at once

five miles out of Tipton Kansas
they appear across the
purple clover tops
like a floating memory

Yellow Alfalfas Viceroy's
Mourning Cloaks and Monarchs
do their crazy jig along the highway
flashing off to answer
the call of lonely dreamers everywhere.

And as if we had
a choice of dreams
a distant coyote runs in the opposite field
smiling head rising and falling
in the green wheat sea.

Animals That Stand in Dreams.

HAWK TOTEMS

All along the highway
hawks are down out of the fog
dark heart bodies on fence poles
and the solitary osage orange
their clear and terrible eyes
hooked over shoulders a gaze
that pierces the private sleep
of early travelers

like a dream swelling
out of this foggy winter morning
'two below in tupelo'
moaning on the radio
and even the pill-heavy truckdrivers
whooping in joy
at wild hawks.

Animals That Stand in Dreams.

THREE HISTORIES OF THE PRAIRIE

The fields
compose
the plains

conspicuous for their
invisible mountains
quiet in the
shape of the wind.

A stone once surrounded
by the legs of bison
survives

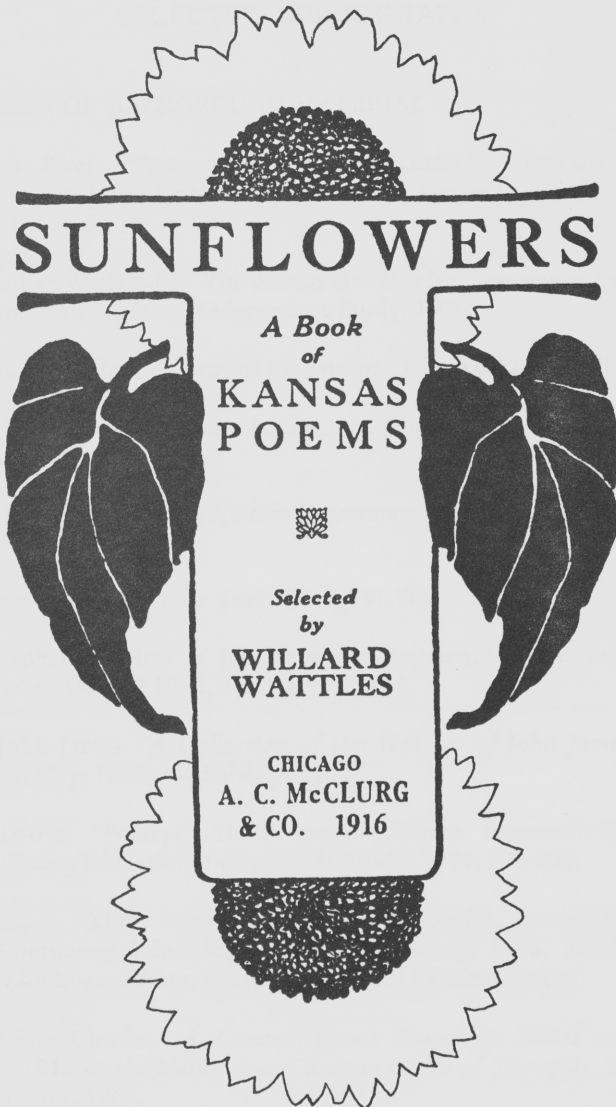
disguised as a
stone on a flat plain.

The fields rise
curving
on earth yellow horizon
unreckonable
The earth forever falling
the sky
forever rising

all animals
arrange themselves
within the fields of space.

Sky Heart (1975).

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