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WHERE THE MIDWEST ENDS AND THE GREAT PLAINS BEGIN¹

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As the United States Senate debated the ratification of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase Treaty, Federalists argued against the acquisition that would double the size of the United States. Delaware's Senator Samuel White, along with other Federalist opponents of the Louisiana Purchase, favored American access to the Mississippi River and New Orleans, but he questioned the need for such a "new, immense, and unbounded world." According to White, it would only be a matter of time before American citizens would enter Louisiana and thus distance themselves by two or three thousand miles from the country's government, becoming alienated from the eastern United States.³ Similarly, Rufus King, who served as American foreign minister to Great Britain at the time, expressed concerns that Louisiana would be "too extensive" to govern effectively.⁴ On

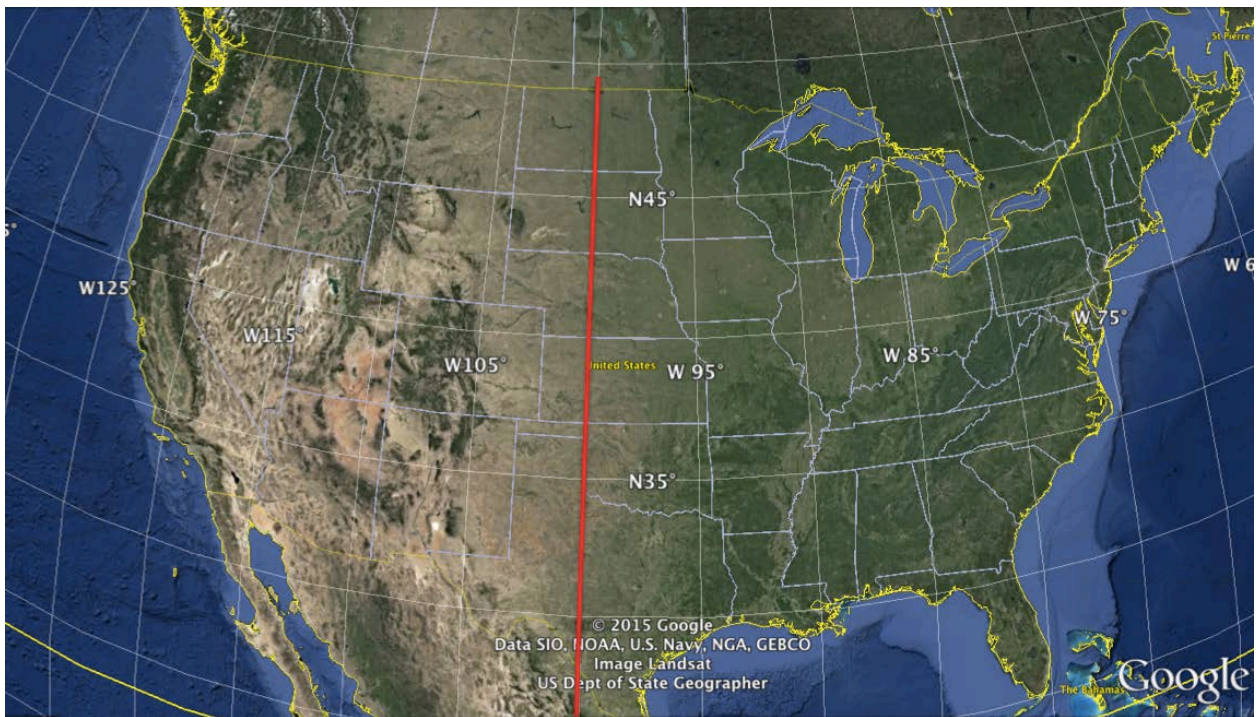
¹ This article is based on a paper originally presented at the Forty-seventh Dakota Conference on the Northern Plains, Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD, April 24-25, 2015. The conference solicited papers focusing on the theme "Where the West Begins?"

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³ Junius P. Rodriguez, ed., *The Louisiana Purchase: A Historical and Geographical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA, ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2002), 419-20.

⁴ Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 289.

the contrary, President Thomas Jefferson viewed the Louisiana Purchase favorably as a region that held vast promises for the future of the United States. As far as Jefferson was concerned, Louisiana Territory, along with the American West as a whole, would take one hundred generations of Americans to settle and to determine the possibilities that the region held. Jefferson theorized that once Americans fully understood its potential, the West's sustainability would last for a thousand more generations.⁵ If Jefferson could have personally seen the West a century later and then again two centuries beyond his time, he would have likely revised his views more than once. More specifically, he would have recognized that the most notable demographic changes and questions regarding economic potential have arguably been in the area known as the Great Plains, that is, the region lying to the immediate west of the 100th meridian. It is at this point that the Midwest begins its transition to the American West, where factors such as climatic conditions, vegetation, and animal life affected the lifestyles of peoples past and present.



The 100th meridian (red) as it crosses the United States.

⁵ Clyde A. Milner II, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the American West* (Lexington, MA, D.C. Heath and Company, 1989), 661.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the West experienced the ebb and flow of non-indigenous peoples bent on bringing Manifest Destiny to fruition. For many, however, the challenges of the West outweighed its potential. Nonetheless, while many Americans ventured westward only to later retreat to the eastern United States, others stayed and endured.⁶ It is important to note that although Manifest Destiny and western settlement are related, they are not the same. The doubling of the United States gave reason for citizens of the young country to envision continued expansion and the eventual settlement of the West, but those who went west did so with both eagerness and trepidation.

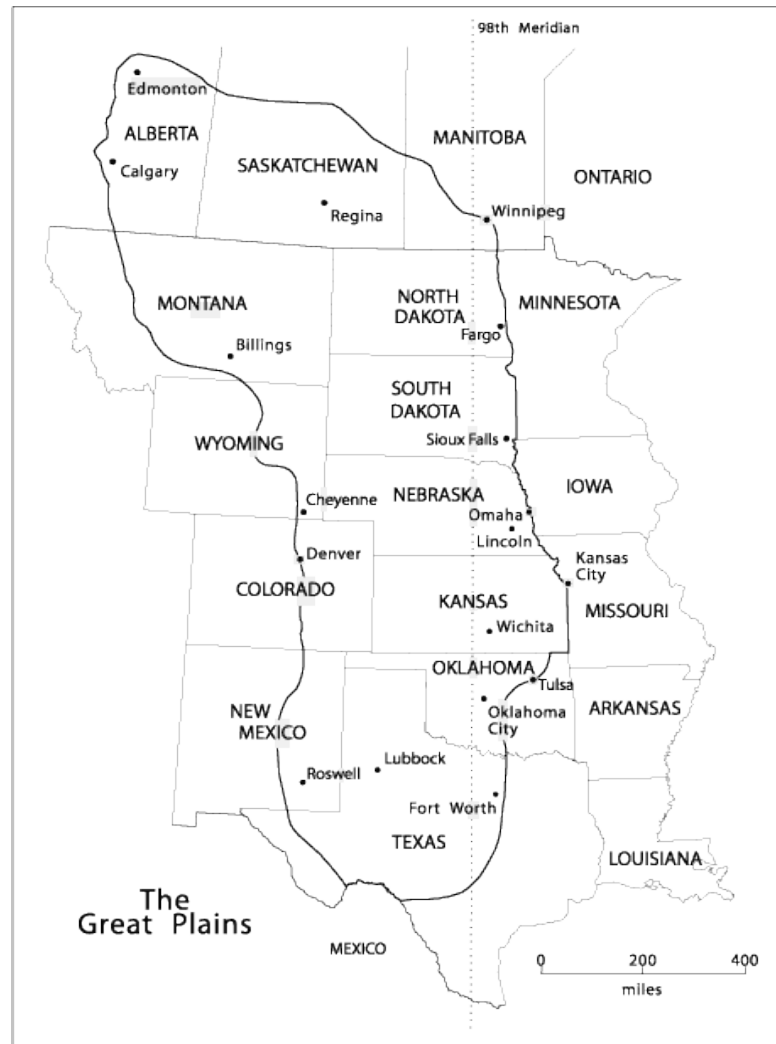
Those who embraced the country's seemingly inevitable future were encouraged by individuals such as newspaper editor John O'Sullivan, who made the now-renowned comment that it was the United States' "manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence"⁷ Americans quickly accepted this notion that God's divine nature guided the country's future, and thus Manifest Destiny became the justification for westward expansion and settlement throughout much of the second half of the nineteenth century. Even in the early 1900s artist Edwin Blashfield designed murals such as *Westward* (1905) and *Spirit of the West* (1910) for the Iowa and South Dakota state capitols, respectively, in which Providence is depicted by female spirits. In *Westward*, the angelic "Spirits of Enlightenment" guided pioneers, while in *Spirit of the West*, South Dakota is portrayed by a woman clasping a Bible to her chest who is guided by a female spirit who floats above her.⁸ Such images of God's divine intervention were popular; author Dee Brown states that the role of Providence was simply "the self-conscious creation of political propaganda" that became known as Manifest Destiny.⁹

⁶ Dee Brown, *The American West* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 25-26.

⁷ Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism & Empire* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1985), 255.

⁸ Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society 1876-1914* (University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 126; Doane Robinson, *South Dakota Historical Collections, vol. V* (Pierre, SD, State Publishing Company, 1910), 245. Although Blashfield originally titled the mural *Spirit of the West*, it has also been known as *Progress of South Dakota* and is currently covered from view with a small plaque noting a legislative name change to *Only By Remembering Our Mistakes, Can We Learn*. For more information about this controversial mural, see the South Dakota Bureau of Administration website "The South Dakota State Capitol: The Decorated Capitol" at <https://boa.sd.gov/divisions/capitol/CapitolTour/blasfield.htm>

⁹ Brown, *The American West*, 80.



General outline of the Great Plains. Map courtesy of the Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Note that the image is used to illustrate only the extent of the Great Plains; the 98th, rather than the 100th, meridian is seen here.

The expansion of the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific under the label of Manifest Destiny is one matter; settlement of the region west of the hundredth meridian remains an issue unto itself. When historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented his paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” to the American Historical Association in 1893, he began by quoting the Superintendent of the Census report that stated the American frontier experience concluded during the 1880s. As a result, the Census bulletin stated, by 1890 there was no longer

a frontier demarcation and the frontier would no longer “have a place in the census reports.”¹⁰ Since then many have refuted the notion of a bygone American frontier. Still, there is much to consider about the events of the time that give credence to the Census report. The expansion of the United States from coast to coast did not mean that settlement progressed in a similar east coast to west coast pattern. In fact, there is a great deal to be noted about the Northern Great Plains - the region ranging from the 100th meridian to the Rocky Mountains - in connection with the end of the frontier proclamation. After all, the Northern Plains was the last real Indian Country with the Sioux nation retaining its venerable images as plains warriors and buffalo hunters. As a result, settlers often quickly passed through or around the region as they headed to destinations farther west, making the Northern Great Plains the last major area of settlement during the nineteenth century.¹¹

Turner advocated that, historically, settlement consisted of four frontier experiences – trading, mining, ranching, and farming.¹² Although each of these affected the Northern Great Plains in their own way, challenges peculiar to the region disrupted the continuity from one frontier to another more than in other parts of the country. For instance, the Arikara may very well be the most underestimated Indian nation of the Northern Plains especially when it comes to the trader’s frontier. William Nester points out that the Arikara War of 1823 was not only the first Plains Indian war but the first war fought between the United States and an Indian nation west of the Mississippi River.¹³ The Arikara resistance to the American fur trade on the upper Missouri River valley impeded early American control and settlement of the Northern Plains. As a result, the Arikara opposition helped to shift much of the American trade from the upper Missouri River to the South Pass of the Rockies.¹⁴

Although the Arikara provided the greatest resistance to American trade and control of the Northern Plains in the early 1800s, the Sioux became the United States’ main rival during the second half of the nineteenth century. The 1862 Dakota Uprising in Minnesota marked the

¹⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 1986), 1.

¹¹ Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), 174, 217.

¹² Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 12.

¹³ William R. Nester, *The Arikara War: The First Plains Indian War, 1823* (Missoula, MT, Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2001), 1.

¹⁴ Brad Tennant, “The Arikara: Roadblock to the American Fur Trade on the Northern Great Plains,” *Heritage of the Great Plains*, 44, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 37.

beginning of conflict between the United States and the Sioux, which included on-and-off again clashes until 1890.¹⁵ With the 1862 Dakota Uprising coming only a year after the creation of Dakota Territory, it is not surprising that the newly created territory – a region comprised of what is now North Dakota, South Dakota, and the eastern portions of Montana and Wyoming – did not experience the influx of settlers often associated with the opening of new lands.¹⁶

Furthermore, the gold rush to Montana in the 1860s and to the Black Hills in the mid-1870s only increased tensions with the Sioux. Sioux opposition to those traveling by way of the Bozeman Trail to Montana resulted in Red Cloud's War, preventing many hopeful prospectors from taking the risk. Although the United States attempted to provide protection by maintaining troops and military forts along the Bozeman Trail, the government finally succumbed to Sioux resistance and agreed to the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. In addition to giving up the forts and closing the trail to the Montana mines, the Fort Laramie Treaty also established the Great Sioux Reservation consisting mainly of present day western South Dakota.¹⁷

After Lieutenant Colonel George Custer's 1874 expedition to the Black Hills returned with news verifying the presence of gold, a wave of miners flooded the region. Since the Black Hills were part of the Great Sioux Reservation, the federal government sent troops to keep miners from encroaching. Despite intercepting and escorting numerous trespassing miners off the reservation, estimates put the number who avoided the military patrols at more than eight hundred by the summer of 1875.¹⁸ When negotiations for the Black Hills ended without compromise, federal officials decided to discontinue its enforcement of no trespassing. This, in turn, meant that beginning in October 1875 the Black Hills gold rush was open for any prospectors willing to take the risk of invading Sioux lands. Increased tensions led to the Sioux War of 1876, which resulted in Congress ratifying an agreement for the Black Hills in February 1877 – an action that has since been declared illegal. Since earlier gold rushes skipped over the Northern Plains/Black Hills region and took place farther west, frontier historian Ray Allen Billington states that the Black Hills gold

¹⁵ Brown, *The American West*, 81, 83.

¹⁶ Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre, SD, South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), 78. In addition to the hostilities associated with the Dakota Uprising, the Civil War waged back east also contributed to Dakota Territory's slow settlement.

¹⁷ Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Indian Heritage of America* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), 338; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 86, 88-89.

¹⁸ Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 130, 132. In its negotiations with the Sioux, the United States government offered to pay the Sioux Nation \$400,000 per year for mining rights or to buy the Black Hills for a total of \$6,000,000. The Sioux refused both offers.

rush marked the end of the “eastward advance” of the mining frontier.¹⁹ Still, the Montana and Dakota gold rushes’ immediate contribution to non-indigenous settlement paled in comparison to other notable mining frontiers such as in California and Colorado, due primarily to the presence of the Sioux Nation.

In the latter months of 1890, government officials became increasingly concerned about the spread of the Ghost Dance to the Sioux where the ceremony gave hope that the buffalo would return and that the white man would disappear. Such fear eventually led to events in December 1890 resulting in the death of the Lakota leader Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee Massacre. Many regard the massacre at Wounded Knee as the last major U.S.-Indian confrontation, marking the final conquest of the American Indian in United States history.²⁰

In 1889, the year before these last acts of subjugation over the Sioux (and American Indians as a whole), the United States welcomed four new states to the Union – North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington, which were followed by the states of Idaho and Wyoming in 1890.²¹ With the exception of Washington and Idaho, the new states included lands located in the Northern Great Plains. Given the circumstances of newly created states and the military conquest of the Sioux, it is not surprising that the Superintendent of the Census felt that the American frontier had indeed passed. Yet, long-avoided by ranchers and farmers who chose to continue their travels to the far western reaches of the United States, the Northern Great Plains remained the one geographic region that upset the progression of frontier settlement. Just as the Northern Plains’ trading and mining frontiers provided challenges to would-be settlers, so, too, did its ranching and farming frontiers. Regardless of reports that the United States succeeded in both its Manifest Destiny and the settlement of the American frontier, significant demands laid ahead for those who sought to make the Northern Plains west of the 100th meridian their home.

In Emerson Hough’s 1903 book *The Way to the West*, Hough devoted his first four chapters to the ax, the American rifle, the birch-bark canoe, and the horse, each of which he credited in their own way with the conquering of the West. In fact, Hough went so far as to say that, “Without the ax, the rifle, the boat and the horse there could have been no West.”²² These might be easily

¹⁹ Ibid., 138-39, 363; Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1967), 633-34.

²⁰ Josephy, *The Indian Heritage of America*, 342.

²¹ Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 103.

²² Emerson Hough, *The Way to the West and the Lives of Three Early Americans: Boone--Crockett--Carson* (Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1903), 25.

replaced with the plow, barbed wire, the wagon, and oxen as perhaps the most significant influences on the prairies west of the hundredth meridian. Whereas the ax was necessary in the woodlands east of the Mississippi River, its value was less appreciated on the relatively treeless plains where farmers used the plow and ranchers grazed their livestock. And although there are numerous stories of tensions between farmers and ranchers, the main weapon was not the rifle; rather, it was barbed wire. Patented in 1874 by Joseph Glidden, barbed wire became increasingly popular as homesteading farmers, cattle ranchers, and sheepherders began to merge and clash throughout the Great Plains.²³ Meanwhile, farm wagons, often covered by canvas (creating the iconic prairie schooner image), replaced the birch-bark canoes used so commonly by early traders and trappers.²⁴ Teams of oxen commonly served as beasts of burden pulling the supply-laden wagons.²⁵ Indeed, the plow, barbed wire, wagon, and oxen were among the most notable influences of the plains.

As settlement of the plains began slowly but surely, historians and geographers attempted to define the Great Plains as a region. Although some general consensus has existed, there have also been a fair number of nuances that continue to blur the distinction between the Midwest and the West or the Central Plains and the Great Plains. For instance, Frederick Jackson Turner regarded the “Middle West” as including the twelve states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota.²⁶ Meanwhile, it is commonly understood that the ten Great Plains states predominantly include North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and portions of New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana.²⁷ It is important to note that the four states that are included in the subset from both groups are South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, thus making them the transitional states between the Midwest and the West, as well as from the Central plains to the Great Plains, a transition that is reflected in its aridity and short grass prairie and that becomes more noticeable beginning at the 100th meridian.

²³ Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 689, 691-92.

²⁴ David Lavender, *The Great West* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 239.

²⁵ Joe Koller, “This Was Homesteading in Dakota,” in *Dakota Panorama*, 3rd ed., ed. J. Leonard Jennewein and Jane Boorman (Sioux Falls, SD, Dakota Territory Centennial Commission, 1973), 222.

²⁶ Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2013), 8.

²⁷ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 2011), xii.

As previously noted, there are subtle differences used by those who attempt to divide the Midwest from the West by describing the starting point of the Great Plains.²⁸ Despite these differences, geographer Edward Patrick Hogan, author of *The Geography of South Dakota*, stated that the more traditional beginning of the Great Plains has been generally “associated with the 100th meridian of west longitude.”²⁹ Although the starting point of the Great Plains has been somewhat of a gray area, the one key factor in defining the Great Plains is that it typically receives less than twenty inches of rainfall per year. This arid nature of the region is what led to Pike’s 1810 report in which he described much of the region between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains as a Great American Desert, a depiction that has endured off and on since then.³⁰ Even today, historical markers in South Dakota point out the significance of the 100th meridian as “the EAST EDGE of the Great American Desert” and how “[f]or two generations the Insurance Companies and other world-wide lending agencies would not, as a matter of agreed policy, lend a shiny dime west of this line.”³¹ Edwin James, in his report from the 1820 Long expedition, described the region as a “dreary plain, wholly unfit for cultivation” and unsuitable for people who depend on agriculture. For Wallace Stegner, the 100th meridian served as a figurative fence that marked the eastern boundary of the arid Great Plains.³²

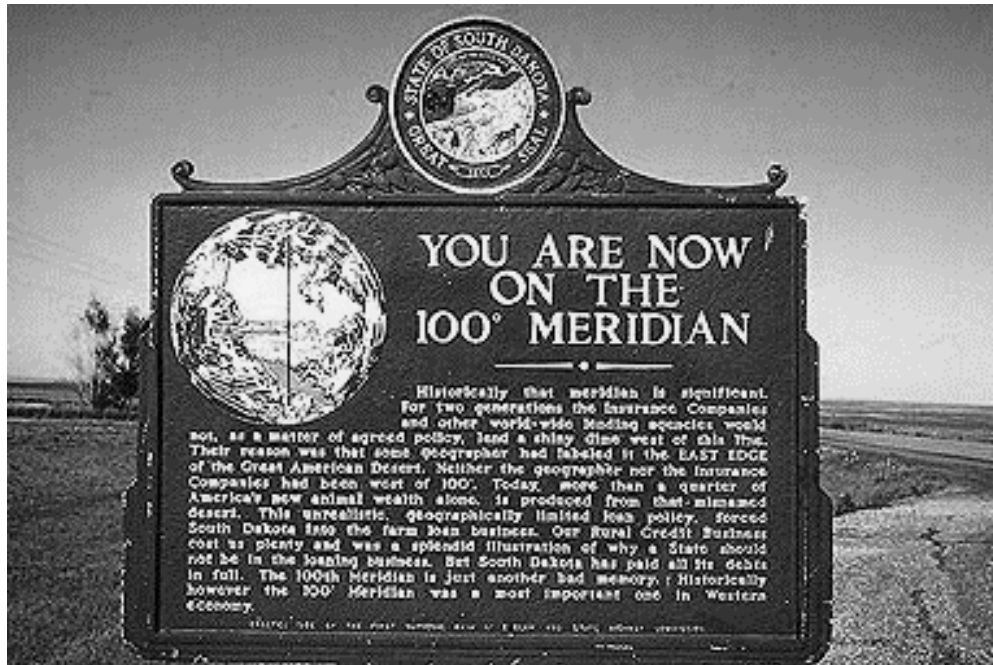
²⁸ In Zebulon Pike’s official report of his 1806-1807 expedition to the southwest, he described regional changes generally beginning west of St. Louis. Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, 215. Dr. Edwin James, who served as the naturalist and official recorder for Stephen Long’s 1820 expedition that followed the Platte River toward the Rockies, noted that a gradual environmental change began around the 96th meridian. American historian Walter Prescott Webb, writing in the first half of the 20th century, viewed the 98th meridian as the start of the Great Plains. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 7-8, 146, 157. Likewise, geographers Frank Popper and Deborah Popper also placed the 98th meridian as the starting point. Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust,” *Planning* (December 1987): 12. John Wesley Powell, who led several exploratory expeditions across the plains to the Rockies, concluded that a subarid zone existed between the 97th and 100th meridians, but beyond the 100th meridian, the characteristics of the Great Plains became more evident. Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, 224.

²⁹ Edward Patrick Hogan and Erin Hogan Fouberg, *The Geography of South Dakota*, rev. ed. (Sioux Falls, SD, The Center for Western Studies, 1998), 162.

³⁰ Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, 214-15. An exhibit at the Timber Lake (SD) and Area Museum shows monthly and yearly precipitation totals from the town’s founding in 1910 through 2014. During this 104 year period, only 31 times has the annual precipitation exceeded twenty inches.

³¹ N. Jane Hunt, ed., *Brevet’s South Dakota Historical Markers* (Sioux Falls, SD, Brevet Press, 1971), 157. Historical markers noting the 100th meridian can be found along US Highways 12 and 14 in South Dakota. A quick internet search shows images of similar markers found from the Dakotas to Texas.

³² Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, 215, 229.



Keeping in mind that Pike, Long, and James traversed the Great Plains in the early 1800s, they considered the positive aspect of such a dreary, uninhabitable region as surely limiting the expansion of westward settlement, thus alleviating the earlier concerns expressed by individuals such as Rufus King and Samuel White about the acquisition of Louisiana Territory and the governing of such a large domain.³³ In hindsight, there was some truth to their belief since the Northern Great Plains would be the last major region to be settled. On the other hand, others came later who felt that the concept of the Great American Desert was an exaggeration. One such individual was John Wesley Powell, whose time, energy, studies, and efforts focused on disproving the misconceptions of the West, especially the region directly beyond the 100th meridian.³⁴

To Powell, the image of a Great American Desert was nonsense. After all, this “desert” supported millions of bison and dozens of Indian nations who did more than merely survive, but in fact, thrived.³⁵ Furthermore, numerous poems, novels, and histories commonly noted the image of the prairie as a sea of grass. In reality, depending on the time and place, the Great Plains image can easily vary from the prairie as a grass sea, as a garden, or as a desert.³⁶ Many who have traveled

³³ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 156-57.

³⁴ Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, 176.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

³⁶ Lauck, *The Lost Region*, 242-43.

across western South Dakota and other Great Plains states have compared the motion of blowing prairie grasses to the waves of a sea. During July and August, there may be areas where the natural grasses have been replaced with gardens of grain waiting to be harvested. Yet, periods of drought and blowing topsoil remain common enough to maintain the perception of a desert.

Webb stated that the combination of land, water, and timber were essential to American civilization east of the Mississippi River; however, only one of these – land – existed adequately between the Mississippi and the Rockies. Given the arid nature beyond the hundredth meridian, along with other challenges, not even the abundance of land could prevent the region's sporadic failures.³⁷ Without question, the challenges of the Northern Great Plains were considerable, yet for many who endured tough times, there are few places where they would rather reside.

David Lavender, in his book *The Great West*, noted the concern over whether the average annual rainfall of the plains would be enough to support agriculture. According to Lavender, once farmers ventured into Kansas northward to Dakota Territory, they crossed what he called the “danger line,” that is, the point at which dry farming becomes unreliable. Given the lack of annual precipitation, gaining access to water was essential for both the rancher and the farmer. A truly fortunate newcomer was the man who had a creek or river nearby. Even then, the task of hauling water from creek to dwelling required a great deal of physical exertion. For the less fortunate, they may have been forced to carry water several miles.³⁸ For others, digging wells was an option as long as the water was not too deep. Eventually, machines pushed pipes deep into the ground; however, it took windmills above ground to pump the water that existed below the surface.³⁹ In the early 1880s, some hopefuls endorsed the theory that increased rainfall would follow the plow, but it proved to be a short-lived belief.⁴⁰ Even the more recent large circular fields watered by pivot irrigation systems face occasional decreases in the supply of water below.⁴¹ Despite the dry years, many farmers and ranchers west of the hundredth meridian maintained a positive outlook. According to

³⁷ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 9.

³⁸ Lavender, *The Great West*, 396. As with Webb, the Poppers, and others, Lavender noted the 98th meridian as the point at which the climate changes resulting in the short grass prairies in contrast to the tall grass prairies east of this point.

³⁹ Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 693.

⁴⁰ Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2007), 136. The slogan “rain follows the plough” is attributed to Charles Dana Wilbur, who first started using the phrase in 1881 to encourage new townsites in Nebraska.

⁴¹ Hogan and Fouberg, *The Geography of South Dakota*, 168.

Kathleen Norris, this optimism is still shared by many who hang onto the hopes of “next year country.”⁴²

Whether from nearby stream, below the surface, or from the skies above, the availability of water for households, livestock, and agriculture can vary greatly from year to year. In the drier years, the waves of prairie grasslands could easily become a frightening wall of fire pushed to great speeds by the incessant winds of the plains. For many plains homesteaders and townspeople, the red horizon of a rapidly approaching prairie fire often meant loss of one’s belongings – home, livestock, and possibly loved ones.⁴³ The wind by itself is a feature that, combined with other factors, becomes a notable characteristic of the Great Plains. Kathleen Norris noted that “the western Dakotas are the windiest region” of the forty-eight contiguous states and that it is the sound of the wind that makes her most often compare the plains to the open sea.⁴⁴ It is the wind that can take a gentle snowfall and turn it into a blinding blizzard; the wind that takes a cold day and makes it even more dangerous by creating life-threatening wind chills; the wind that can blow the topsoil high above the ground as was often the case with the black blizzards of the Dirty Thirties.⁴⁵ It is not particularly surprising that, given the propensity of wind on the plains, today’s technology is now harnessing wind power as a viable source of energy.

For early settlers, the immediate concern was shelter – temporary at first and a more substantial structure eventually. Just as Walter Prescott Webb noted the settlers’ concern for water on the Great Plains, he also noted the lack of timber for housing. Given the lack of wood, pioneers made do with what they had. This meant that, in most cases, housing options included shanties, sod houses, and dugouts. None of these were especially large, but the intent was to use them as temporary shelter until a larger, sturdier dwelling could be built, at which time the original

⁴² Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 18. *Dakota* served as the 2014 North and South Dakota One Book Selection to commemorate the Quasiquicentennial of statehood for South and North Dakota.

⁴³ Brad Tennant, “Red Horizons: South Dakota Prairie Fires,” in *18th Dakota History Conference Papers*, compiled by H. W. Blakely (Madison, SD, Dakota State College, 1987), 646.

⁴⁴ Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, 40.

⁴⁵ Lavender, *The Great West*, 396; Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 5-6. For photographs and more information about black blizzards, see Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns, *The Dust Bowl: An Illustrated History* (San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2012) and the 2012 PBS documentary *The Dust Bowl*, directed by Ken Burns and produced by Dayton Duncan, Ken Burns, and Julie Dunfey. The debate regarding the causes of the Dirty Thirties include the perception of the Great Plains as a desert in which such events will naturally occur, a man-made disaster generated by plowing the prairie grassland, and the combination of both as contributing factors.

temporary shelter was often turned over to the livestock.⁴⁶ With such challenges existing beyond the hundredth meridian, it is understandable why Watson Parker, a longtime Black Hills and American West historian, recounted that dejected homesteaders often sang,

It's fifteen miles to water,
And twenty miles to wood;
To hell with this damned country
I'm going home for good!⁴⁷

From the 1890 perspective, it is understandable how the settling of the Northern Great Plains allegedly marked the end of the frontier in American history, but over the years, it is also easy to acknowledge why the frontier never really disappeared. Given the circumstances west of the 100th meridian, agricultural historian Gilbert Fite is undoubtedly correct to point out that the thousands of land-seeking settlers who seemingly brought an end to the frontier were only half of the story – “thousands more were conquered by it.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, many view the attempted settlement of the Great Plains as creating negative changes that actually contributed to the image of a Great American Desert. Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns emphatically state that the Dust Bowl “was the worst man-made ecological disaster in American history.”⁴⁹ Timothy Egan stated that much of the Great Plains never fully recovered from the Dust Bowl years.⁵⁰ In the same vein, geographers Frank Popper and Deborah Popper contend that attempts to settle the Great Plains resulted in the “longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in American history,” a mistake that is evidenced by the depopulation of numerous towns and counties.⁵¹

As renewed interest in the Midwest continues to build, there will undoubtedly be a wave of new political, economic, social, and environmental studies that examine the region. Considering the vastness of a twelve state Midwest region, however, considerable differences between the eastern

⁴⁶ Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 176. The typical shanty consisted of a nine by twelve foot structure consisting of pine boards covered by tarpaper, whereas a sod house took advantage of sod strips cut from the prairie and supported by a simple wooden frame. The third option, a dugout, required digging into a hillside.

⁴⁷ Watson Parker, “A Westward Heritage,” *South Dakota History*, 6, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 331.

⁴⁸ Nash, *Creating the West*, 78. Fite’s article appeared in the October 1966 issue of *Agricultural History*.

⁴⁹ Duncan and Burns, *The Dust Bowl: An Illustrated History*, 5.

⁵⁰ Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 309.

⁵¹ Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust,” *Planning* December 1987, <http://www.planning.org/25anniversary/planning/1987dec.htm>

Midwest states and those of the Great Plains will persist. Whereas Ohio and Michigan mark the start of the region historically known as the Midwest, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota on the western edge of this region will always be notable for their own historical perceptions and environment. It is with the Northern Plains states that we see the transition from the Central Plains to the Great Plains and from the Midwest to the American West, and specifically, this transition becomes more evident when one travels west of the 100th meridian.