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A GEOGRAPHER'S GEOGRAPHY LESSON ON THE PRAIRIES

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TO THE deep satisfaction of the writer, a share was given him in the work of the Nebraska geographers at the State Teachers Association held in Omaha on the eighth, ninth and tenth of November. Addresses were given before the Nebraska branch of the National Council, and before the sections of Commerce, Geography and Literature. The Council commanded a large attendance at an early hour in the parlors of Hotel Rome, where thoroughly matured reports were offered by Professor Rose B. Clark on Geography in the Elementary School; by Professor Jeannette C. Nelson on Geography in the Junior High School; and by Professor A. J. Mercer on Geography in the High School. The Geography section, under the presidency of Professor N. A. Bengtson, was adjourned from a small room to a large hall to make room for the hundreds that sought attendance. The work of this section will be directed during the coming year by Superintendent W. T. Davis of the McCook schools. An informal dinner at Hotel Castle on Thursday evening brought together a select group of workers, and was given to discussion, especially of the baffling but vital problem of geography in the high school.

The value of emphasis on mature geography in the higher schools is well to be seen in this State. The Department of Geography in the University of Nebraska, through Dr. Condra, its head, and Professor Bengtson and others associated with them, wields a vital power in all school work in the subject. The value of geographic study is also brought home to the people through an unusual correlation with the department, of several practical activities. Thus Dr. Condra is director of the Soil Survey, in cooperation with the United States Bureau of Soils. Closely related are also the State Conservation and Welfare Commission, the State Highway Commission, the investigation of road materials and the new development of the potash industry. A useful item of conservation work has been the preparation of 40,000 feet of film illustrating the principal industries and regions of Nebraska. These films have been widely shown in and out of the state and are everywhere available to the geography teachers.

The excuse for overstepping the Mississippi and the Missouri was a call to give help in geography. In attempting so to

do far more was gained than was given. Through the courtesy of friends some hundreds of miles of country road and of farms were seen about Omaha, near Lincoln, and in the parts of Iowa northward from Des Moines. Some geography can be learned from books and teachers, but more can be gotten, and irrevocably, from the soil and the surface. The writer thought he knew somewhat about the prairies and had even ventured a small way into print, but it was mainly from car window and book. But when there are five, or ten, or twelve feet of black earth under the foot and when the eye rests on yellow fields of corn all the way to the horizon, the prairie gathers solidity in the consciousness. One sees why the "poor white trash" is so rare as to be the exception, proving the proud dictum of the prairie dweller,—of such "we have none." Land at \$200, or \$250 per acre will not let poor people live on it. The geographer does not intend to get into trouble here by delving into precise reasons—enough that in the heart of the prairies it is true.

The memory dimly recalls relatives who migrated after the Civil War from western New York to western Iowa. What would be their fortunes in that remote region, when Iowa was perhaps twenty years from the beginning of its statehood? To-day the shack has given way to the mansion, and the windbreaks, grown tall, give the aspect of little woodlots surrounding the homes. Palace cars run from Sioux City to Des Moines and St. Louis, and from Omaha to Chicago, Denver and the Pacific Coast. And the corn field and the steer, the village elevator and the railroad, the packing house and the telegraph, point the way from the prairie to all lands. Thus home geography amplifies into world geography.

Here in the North Central prairie is an adjustment of man to the earth. Out of it we can pick some geographic bits. Iowa might raise and once did raise much wheat. Wheat as a frontier crop has moved on to the northwest, and wheat as an intensive crop yields the farmer less than corn, steer and hog. An eastern breeder of fancy milkers told an audience of Iowa farmers that they might create a great dairy state. But the Iowa farmer, taught by his agricultural schools, by tons of farm periodicals and by his experience, knows that he might, but that he will not, for the present adjustment puts more money into his pocket than the dairy alternative could promise. He does not buy costly sires from the east, but "feeders," gathered from the plains at Omaha. If you ask him how many he has, he answers, one, two, or more "carloads." He can buy or sell better in multiples of twenty, because he keeps harmony with shipping requirements,

and thus he weaves an added small mesh in the geographic net. He feeds the steers a year, more or less, from his pastures and corn cribs, and they move on eastward. The teacher can put these things together—herds on the great plains, Omaha, packing houses, feeders, Iowa black soil, corn, alfalfa, the Chicago packing house, New York, Liverpool,—local geography—world geography!

Not only soil and corn, but the climate, makes it easier to fatten steers than in the East. The corn stalks, freed by the husker, but still standing, are browsed by the cattle to late autumn or early winter. There is not too much snow and less housing is required than in the snowbound East. The overhanging straw stack and the lee of barns and windbreaks will serve for shelter save when the blizzard is abroad. And the swine, nicely adjusted to the number of cattle on the individual farm, live from what the steer leaves on the ground or in the manure heap. Nor may we forget the economy of having eighty acres of corn in one field or tilling those eighty acres by advanced types of machinery. Compare the eastern cornfield, the silo, the cutting, shocking, husking, piling and drawing of dry corn, with the husker and the wagon and the seventy or hundred bushels per day of one man and one team on the prairie.

In the East, the traveller finds trunk lines of highway along which his motor car may securely move, but he swings at his peril into the byways and hill roads of New York or New England. On the prairie however nearly every road is safely open. The subsoil is readily turnpiked by powerful road machines. gravel is drawn on and a good road soon develops, and in the drier climate is relatively permanent. Such conditions aid in putting a "flivver"—Ford car—on almost every farm, and in a certain prairie county, no doubt in nearly all, every resident could travel at the same moment in the county's outfit of automobiles. This condition, plus the telephone, destroys distance and makes large areas of farm homes into closeknit communities. The farmer's family like the farmer himself, changes its horizon in the late hours of the afternoon, when the day's work is done and the horses are at rest. Thus geographic conditions before we know it land us in the field of sociology and we retrace our steps lest we meet the scoffer with his quest for a definition of geography.

The prairie, from Chicago to central Nebraska, reveals almost no waste land. This statement becomes more nearly exact each year, through the vast amount of tiling by which the low

places and bogs are undergoing reclamation. Field after field was pointed out with the remark—here, five or ten years ago was a lake.

The amount of surface relief, and the variety of it, are not well known, and our books do not adequately describe it. We content ourselves with references to the valleys cut by dissecting agencies below the plain and by noting those glacial thickenings which lie above it. This easy way however gives no knowledge of the heavily rolling surfaces of the deeply dissected drift sheets of southwestern Iowa and eastern Nebraska, and fails wholly to mark those endless gentle swells and descents which relieve the landscape of monotony and make it quite unsafe to take the Red River bottoms or the High Plains as types of surface in the North Central region.

Why does Iowa, older and greater in population, remain essentially a rural state while Nebraska develops a large city on the banks of its greatest river? It may be objected that Iowa with its more numerous cities outnumbers in urban population its western neighbor. The fact remains that Iowa has not, and seems not likely to have, a city of the first order of population. Council Bluffs, like Omaha, is on the Missouri River and is older than Omaha, but Council Bluffs is perhaps on the wrong side of its state for great growth, though conditions at Kansas City throw doubt on this conclusion. At all events Omaha, the Nebraska terminal of the Union Pacific Railway, was thus destined nearly a half century ago, to be the great city of Nebraska, the gathering station and point of departure of its vast products.

On the east it would seem that the twin cities in the north, St. Louis in the south, and Chicago on the shore of Lake Michigan, eliminated any hope that Iowa might have a great city on the Mississippi River. It may be quite to the weal of a rich state to be without a great city. The problems of city growth, thus hinted at but in no degree solved, might well claim intensive study from some North Central geographer.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

The Association of American Geographers has decided to omit its annual meeting which was scheduled to be held at the University of Chicago, Dec. 27-29. The annual meeting of the National Council of Geography Teachers which was to be held in connection with that meeting will also be omitted; this action by the National Council seems advisable, as it is believed that comparatively few of the members would feel justified in incurring the expense of a trip to Chicago for a one day's meeting.