The Farmers’ Frontier

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The quarter-century after the Civil War was a period of very rapid growth for the United States. A significant part of that growth was geographical. At the end of the war, the area west of the Mississippi River was sparsely populated except for the first tier of states on the west bank, Texas, and a line of settlement on the Pacific Coast. But by 1890, according to the official census of that year, this hitherto largely empty territory had been settled. It was no longer possible to draw a line on a map of the United States marking the boundary between settled and unsettled areas. The frontier, which according to Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory of 1893 had been the chief determining element in forming the United States, had come to an end.

The process of settlement was filled with danger and excitement and has continued to exercise a firm hold on Americans' imaginations. We still entertain ourselves with stories of battles with Indians, of prospectors searching for the elusive big strike that would make them wealthy overnight, of cattle barons and cowboys in conflict with the elements or each other in their efforts to raise beef to feed the growing cities of the East. But while fur trappers before the Civil War, and miners and cattlemen afterwards, played vital roles in opening up the trans-Mississippi West and awakening people to its enormous possibilities, its actual settlement was accomplished by less glamorous figures in less exciting ways. It was farmers who were primarily responsible for establishing a settled society in the area from the Mississippi to the Pacific, and their story, while not having the same aura of glamour as surrounds the mountain man or the prospector or the Indian fighter or the cowboy, has its own share of human drama.

In the first place, farmers on the Great Plains had to learn to adapt to an unfamiliar and harsh environment. Bitter cold in winter, burning hot in summer, lacking timber and stone for building materials, and subject to periodic droughts, windstorms, and insect plagues, the Plains were a mighty challenge to those who chose to try their fortunes there. Further, as they learned the techniques enabling them to deal with nature, they found themselves confronted with other problems, particularly steadily falling prices for the crops they grew and large fixed debts for the land, tools, and machines they needed to grow them. Caught in this economic squeeze, farmers began to band together to seek solutions to their problems, first through the Patrons of Husbandry, or Grange, in the 1870s and then through the Populist Movement in the 1880s and 1890s. These attempts at political action enjoyed only partial success, but did pave the way for some of the reforms of the Progressive Movement of the twentieth century.

In the meantime, however, farmers on the Plains still had to learn to deal with the everyday problems created by the stringent conditions under which they had to live.
"I was alone all the daylight hours with the cattle, and all around me the prairie was dying. The sound of death was in the wind that never stopped blowing across the whitening grass, or rustling the dead weeds at the edges of the fields. There was a forlorn, lonely note in the bawl of a calf for its mother and in the honking of wild geese down the pale sky." Grace Snyder's thoughts were the aftermath of death, the obliteration of a distant neighbor boy who had died while hurrying through his noon dinner. She and her family had walked the half mile to the funeral, where the glass-topped coffin exposed the bloated face of John, as lonely in death as the prairies were in life. Grace had known solitude playing among the bleached bones in the buffalo wallow, she and her sister alone because the Snyder farm was so far from neighbors. Grace's father had migrated with his proud wife and three daughters from Missouri to the Platte River Valley in Custer County, Nebraska. That was 1885, and Grace was three. Their father had preceded them and prepared housing, but Grace later remembered her first sight of "two naked little soddies" on a bare, wind-swept ridge. Nothing else. The flatness of the prairies threatened her with a child's unconscious fear of abandonment, perhaps of lost identity, perhaps even of oblivion beneath that unbroken sky. . . .

Seth Humphrey became a mortgage collector, traveling across the Great Plains in the early 1890s. Everywhere he found abandoned claims, shacks pulled apart and used by others, the winds and the horizon taking their toll. Guy Divet, an Irishman who had come to Dakota with his family in the 1870s and prospered, told the story of another couple who had not. Ned and his young pregnant wife moved into the neighborhood, and in their first winter Margie was "sick and out of her mind with loneliness and fear." So the warm, caring Divets took them in for the winter, putting up a bed in their living room.

That spring Mrs. Divet helped with the birth, but the young mother remained half-crazed, and the young father grew more and more depressed. So they left with Margie still ill. The neighbors raised thirty-six dollars to help them. The baby died on the journey and the mother shortly after. Ned sold the wagon and team to pay for the burials. "Grist for the prairie mill," the Divets said. Ned's claim was jumped, but before that the Divets rode over to see his cabin. There were unwashed dishes and a homemade crib. The Divets piled dry weeds, lit them, and watched reverently as the cabin burned to the ground. It did not take long.

But the fire could not erase the memory, and the prairie continued to stare. Mrs. Divet herself developed a goiter, and when her husband offered a visit to her family in Wisconsin, she refused, sadly pointing to her straggly hair and sagging body and "this hideous bag that hangs at my throat." "No," she cried, "it's too late now. I don't want to go." The Divet manuscripts are memorials to "the frayed ends" of these lives, "the heartstrings broken in the process of uprooting never to be brought together again."
The lives of the Snyders, the Humphreys, and the Divets were in many respects full and rewarding. Nevertheless, as with all settlers on the Great Plains between the Civil War and the close of the century, the fact of isolation underlay all other facts, social, economic, and political. Isolation was the environment in which the structure of the community must grow. Shortly after the turn of the century, when the President's Commission on Country Life asked over 100,000 rural inhabitants what could improve their lives, an overwhelming response was better roads, or, in other words, a way of overcoming isolation.

Eugene Virgil Smalley spelled out the central problem in similar terms. A newsman, he had lived and worked from Ohio to Minnesota, served in the government, and traveled abroad. "In no civilized country," he wrote, "have the cultivators of the soil adapted their home life so badly to the conditions of nature." He saw only one solution: to draw farmers together into village communities. He knew that it would be difficult because of land laws and, even more important, American ways of thinking. There is an old western saying, he quoted, that the prairies would not produce until the Indian was beaten out of them, something savage wrested from the land by individual struggle.

Smalley told of four farm families who, like many others, had decided to work more closely by building their houses and barns on the adjacent corners of their claims. But in a few years they all moved to the far corners because, they explained lamely, when they were together their chickens had gotten mixed up. Such was the "crusty individuality" that Smalley felt had produced the inheritance of isolated lives.

Some cultural identities, however, did stem from the use of, if not love of, the land. Sometimes one part of the ecology, one feature of the natural environment, can become the center of the culture, the heart of the community, like corn for the Latin-American natives or the buffalo for the Sioux. Thus on the plains cultural differences arose between wheat and corn farming. Corn cultivation spread into the plains following the water-courses, and carrying a certain life-style. The corn-husker reflected his "corn-belt mentality" when he spoke of huskings, cribs, and fodder, topics irrelevant to the wheat grower. And, more basically, he and the wheat farmer would argue over proper use of the upland plains. Each wave of newcomers to Nebraska between the 1850s and 1880s brought new and conflicting concepts of land use. In time attitudes would change, but before the late 1870s two potential cultural communities existed.

Separate crop cultures, however, did not really develop on the plains, partly because the environment was a common hazard, a common hardship, and it dictated fast, cooperative action from cornhusker, wheat grower, or cattle grazer alike. Prairie fires, for example, were a threat to all. And wolves, jackrabbits, and rattlesnakes, like fires, were more effectively controlled by cooperative drives. Cooperative coyote hunting in pioneer Nebraska was probably the only occasion when farmers, cattlemen, and sheep men worked in concert—although afterward, eating cold pies with their wives in the nearest barn mow, in their conversations they dwelled on only safe topics like past hunts. Natural disasters such as floods could be better withstood by groups. The common threat of the environment is suggested in the tall tales and weather jokes. Why did the western farmer so love to tell of the drought when the fish in the river kicked up such a dust that the volunteer fire department had to sprinkle them down? Or why did
he like to repeat the details of the well that ran so dry that a tornado lifted it from one county to another? Perhaps because the common experience welded them in a psychic community. That same drought of the tall tales, for example, brought the farmers of Roten Valley, Nebraska, to act in concert regarding their suffering livestock. Thus the environment bred cooperative action.

Prairie farmers followed a long tradition of frontier cooperation. In colonial New England all non-farming artisans and laborers were required by law to help with the mowing and reaping. In western Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century neighbors would donate three days to build a newcomer's house, including furniture. In Kentucky about 1810 an observer described a cooperative "bond of amity." "In no other part of the world," he wrote, "is good neighborship found in greater perfection." Everywhere the tradition was built on the problem of getting big jobs done, tasks too large for the individual-clearing acres of land, house and barn raising, road building, threshing before the rains. These were situations in which men were grappling most desperately with the environment.

On the plains cooperative house raising retained its full vigor. Howard Ruede, a thin young Pennsylvania Moravian who went to Kansas in 1877, explained that neighbors would gather from miles around to construct a settler's house, and they would finish in a day. Eleven men had helped a neighbor shortly before, though Ruede was sure six could have done the job. Houses were raised frequently enough that men fell in accustomed roles based on their skills. Such raisings were not always signs of stability, for many a house soon needed moving, sometimes for long distances, as to a new homestead. More often, though, the move for which the neighbors would gather would be short, like putting Percy Ebbutt's cabin on rollers to relocate on a hilltop or dragging Faye Lewis's house on skids to a site nearer the well.

Hospitality itself was largely an exchange of goods and services. A farmer, for example, would sometimes have to ride for days to round up stray cattle, but he would never want for lodging or provender. Some distant, lonely neighbor could be found for roof, a meal, and hay. "You'll do the same for me, he would hear, "when I'm in your parts." It was an outright exchange, the neighbor expecting reciprocity. When the farmer moved on main-traveled roads, he would more likely pay for his lodging. In such a situation the Snyders were once amazed to be charged a whopping eight dollars.

The height of cooperative work came at harvest time. In those autumn days of thronging threshers and aching backs, the traditions of cooperation prospered. Crews made the rounds from farm to farm, and men sweated together over one another's fields. The men talked at dinner, cooked by women whose backs also ached. Later there was talk in the barn as the men waited for a squall to pass. One Iowa farmer described these moments as "inner neighborhood." Such was the conversational stuff of community, and it grew from simple but universal topics like the weather-the breeze from the east, the nervousness of the horses, and the "sun dogs" in the west that portended storm. Or it could be the state of the crops or the advantages of this country over another region or another land.

The threshing crew was a mixed lot. In addition to the local neighbors exchanging work, there could be a few leftover hired hands, some unemployed seasonal
workers like timber men in Minnesota, perhaps a hobo, and a schoolboy or two. The non-neighbors were paid. A band cutter got $1.50 a day in Minnesota in the early 1880s. These men slept in haymows and were fed plenty of chicken and pumpkin pie. Ebbutt thought they "lived off the fat of the land."

The cooperative element in threshing should be placed in the context of a rather large, extensive operation that was partly local cooperation and barter, partly capitalistic investment, and partly involvement in wider economic markets. The threshing machine itself, for example, was usually owned by one or two of the neighbors, who would assemble the crew, arrange the schedule, and bring the rig around for a cash fee or a portion of the crop. If the machine was owned by a Swede and you were the only non-Swede in the area, your turn might well come last. But you probably had little choice, for the cost of a thresher in 1851 was $175. Few farmers could afford that, since most had already invested a minimum of $400 just to begin farming. . . .

. . . Threshing was typical of other mixes of cooperation, barter, and cash. If you exchanged work and brought along a team for a day, you got three days' work from a man without a team. In exchange for sporadic labor over many months as a hired hand, Howard Ruede received help in breaking three acres of his own land, 11 ½ bushels of wheat, a few bushels of rye, and five dollars.

Reciprocal labor resulted far more often from an absence of capital than from a desire to cooperate. Anyone could offer labor, but few could offer cash. . . .

. . . Howard Ruede's Kansas neighborhood in the 1870s circulated a paper seeking help in building the school, either work or money. Eighty-one hours were pledged, but only eighteen dollars in cash. Pockets then were empty because of hard times following 1873; but in depression or not, reciprocal work expanded the cash supply. The neighbors were a reservoir of cooperative labor that assumed the nature of capital. . . .

So the plains environment and an immature economy spawned cooperative activities that could become community. Irrespective of economic forces, however, the isolation of farms called up a strong psychic yearning for companionship. Starved emotions cried for nourishment. Certainly the community was small enough in numbers, but the distances reduced practical contacts to the level of acquaintances in a large city. Neighborhoods in Kansas are measured in miles, not blocks, wrote Charley O'Kiefe, adding sadly if not typically that there was little social intermingling, and only two dances a year.

Edgar Watson Howe had an explanation for the kind of gloomy picture O'Kiefe drew. Howe thought his neighbors in Missouri in the 1850s were so habituated to isolation that they could socialize for only a short time, as in church, and then they would immediately head for their farms to resume their lives of misery. It was an immature or arrested social life. Richard Weston had earlier described a frontier party in which forty couples engaged in "puerile and frivolous sport," like kissing games, and usually in silence because the art of conversation was so little known. Of course, the preponderance of accounts of social life on the plains frontier is of vital, engaging, lively times, but the more grim commentators would say that the happier descriptions were
reflections of the infrequency of the contacts, etching them in memory and exaggerating them in reminiscence.

Still there is abundant evidence of pleasurable social life among prairie farmers. In North Dakota in the 1870s a ring of eight families rotated their dances every Friday night. Even Grace Fairchild, a big woman whose strong face reflected her hard life, recalled that the dances were so popular around her house that in rapid succession they outgrew the parlor, the machine shed, and the barn. These parties were usually open, nonselective affairs. At least Percy Ebbutt always assumed that if anyone had a party everyone else was invited.

There were quilting bees, husking bees, apple bees, and "fulling bees" (for the fulling or thickening of cloth). To be sure, all these had practical ends, but they skillfully blended play with cooperative work, "a means of enlivening the spirits of old and young." As in any other true community, these occasions sparked tension. Hamlin Garland remembered Mrs. Whitwell's ostracism from the quiltings because she was too loud and told vulgar stories. There were limits to which loneliness would compel acceptance, but Garland understood as well as anyone else the gratifying cohesive force in this cooperative socialization-the vigor, the laughter, the rejoicing. Imagine what it meant even to children playing together under the frame with adults chattering and stitching on the quilt above.

At least two holidays embraced the whole community. Decoration Day combined spring with a communal memorial. Everyone picked flowers, decorated the graves, and remained for the picnic. But no community event pulled together the straggling farms as did the Fourth of July. At some nearby fort or crossroad there were flags and speeches and cold chicken, and the day was full of horse races, foot races, sack races, and baseball. There were greased pigs, greased poles, and gallons of cold drinks. At Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1859, it took four horse-drawn wagons to draw ice for the lemonade alone. Faye Lewis, a shy adolescent in South Dakota, was taken to the celebration her first year on the plains. She feared that, for families like hers, farmers who could not afford the expense or time, it would be an "irresponsible and reckless binge," but she later understood the "immeasurable benefits" from the three days, from the four-hour wagon ride, the parade, the singing, the merry-go-round, the popcorn, the fireworks. For similar reasons Friday night "literaries," often sedate enough, occasionally reverted to nonsense: Resolved that pigs are smarter than sheep; or, Resolved that it is better to be kicked by a mule than bitten by a rattler.

Between special occasions and formal gatherings, there was always visiting. In Oklahoma in the 1890s, Allie Wallace thought that her house enjoyed so many visitors because her mother owned a sewing machine; but the need being met was deeper than practicality. Grace Snyder observed an increase in visiting during a period of extended drought. The relief of tensions through social intercourse was well expressed by Grace's father, who, even when weary, wished to go visiting. He took his family, weather permitting, as often as once a week, jolting over the miles, bearing a few gifts of flowers or fresh eggs, hoping for a sip of wine and a face. For a time isolation would thaw in the warmth of human contact.
Worship services, prayer meetings, evening sings, and especially camp meetings were social events too. Small groups of neighbors could always pray together in farmhouses, but the outdoor revivals, lasting from three days to a week provided the most highly charged release of emotion. Families came from dozens or hundreds of miles. Religion in wagons, Charles Reed called it, and like most other farmers he happily welcomed any preacher who stopped at his sod-house door. The word flew. Soon there would be "tenting tonight" in the old grove at the forks of Clear Creek. Preaching and bonfires and a few true conversions there were, but the serious reclamation of souls was overlaid with the spirit of the Fourth of July. Everyone came- Baptists, Mennonites, and Catholics. The circuit rider preached to a heterogeneous congregation. Most people went, even when they had to sit under clumps of hay on poles for shade. At least, Allie Wallace said, it "broke the monotony." Whatever their backgrounds, they joined or witnessed members of their community publicly confessing sin or publicly accepting the Lord. . . .

The place, as an ecological system, demanded economic cooperation, and the size of the group, small but scattered, shaped the need for social gatherings; but neither would bring community without the values of sharing and caring. Such values were once held aloft by Fred Shannon as a distinctive culture revolving around cooperative rural life. Such a cooperative culture based on values might indeed be a community, but, on the other hand, group cooperation does not necessarily mean community. Was it evidence of cooperative culture when, during a measles epidemic, neighbors fed stricken families and took in their healthy children to stem the spread of the disease? Or when neighbors banded together to help the surviving families of two murdered men? Or when settlers shared the cost of a school teacher by rotating her residence among them? Or when, after a disastrous fire, the farmers near Torkel Fugelstad threshed his crop while he was away?

Was, for example, Mrs. Lockhart living the cooperative life when, unpaid, she brought her "little kit and some tools" either to deliver babies or to prepare bodies for burial? Or the "angel of mercy," who came to the smallpox house to nurse the sick while others whipped their horses to get by faster? Or Mollie Sanford, who was always feeding wanderers? Or the bachelor nursing a neighbor through a long illness? Or the neighbors in North Dakota who walked to one another's farms after severe storms to make sure everyone could get out? Or the boy in Iowa who hunted daily to feed an entire area stricken by a grasshopper plague? Or Mrs. King, who, after caring for her own twelve children, nursed the neighborhood sick, carrying their chamber pots and wet-nursing their babies?

Like exchange work, altruistic acts embodied the techniques of survival. Mollie Sanford once said that she took care of others but also expected others to care for her when she needed help. In this sense charity is individualistic, and its arena may more realistically be called the neighborhood than the community. A neighborhood is a loose collection of people, informal, unofficial, with no binding force over its members. It is reflected in many simple acts like the willingness to stop and talk over the fence. The altruism of the plains farmer, the aesthetics of the cooperative life, may have stopped at the level of neighborhood.
Of course, if there was a community on the plains, individual tensions would rise within it. There is no paucity of evidence for individualism. When John McConnell, for example, distilled from his lifetime on the Illinois prairie a composite pioneer settler, his figure was not cooperative but proud and solitary. This farmer might welcome a stranger, but he would not want him to stay long. "It was but little assistance that he ever required from his neighbors, though no man was ever more willing to render it to others in the hour of need." These were types like Jules Sandoz in Nebraska, egotistical and even antisocial. They were not likely to keep memoirs. But their figures emerge in the accounts of others. They were smudges on the record of community building. When the Wares, dirty but proud, were kindly offered some potatoes to help them over a hard time, they went to the cellar and took a bushel of the biggest and best. The Cogills, when offered chicken feed, took fine seed corn. The Fairchilds once failed to tell a neighbor that he had eaten carbolic acid in their house because they were afraid they would be blamed if he died.

A strong competitive spirit was a boon to individualism and a bane to the furthering of community. "They were always racing in those days," Garland said. Holiday rivalries were perpetuated in the shooting matches and tugs-of-war. At log rollings men struggled to build the largest piles. Harvest crews raced to the ends of the rows. And those who did not win could still tell a tall tale, for the language was peculiarly braced with competitive exaggeration. Behind the bragging was often severe privatization. Some subjects were retained for the individual or family alone, topics into which the community had no entry. Curiously, for example, bedbugs, known to be legion and battled by all, could not be discussed.

The vigorous individualism of the plains farmer has been overemphasized in the annals of the West. But it should not be dismissed. . . . Among pioneers there was a common bond, so ingrained that conformity to it was assumed, and non-conformists were instinctively ostracized. The essence of the bond was endurance, the triumph over a hostile wilderness. Although the end might be a common tie, the beginning was not in the ethics of the group but in the supreme value of the individual.

Walter Prescott Webb claimed that the 100th meridian, symbol of the passage to the Great Plains, shook to the foundation the culture of those who crossed it. In one respect Webb was wrong- the plains did not change the institution of the family. . . . The pattern of frontier family life was remarkably nuclear and similar to patterns elsewhere in the nation. James Davis, for example, in a study of ten thousand pioneer households between 1800 and 1840, found practically no one living alone. Even the few hired hands resided in the households. On the northern plains families were small- at any given time the largest number of children was only one or two, owing to birth control (abstinence), the young age of the couples, and the absence of economic incentives for large families. The pioneer farm family was nuclear in the sense that it was isolated from the community, a separate unit not subject to community controls. Of course, there were exceptions where the family appeared to be intimately linked with the community. In the Dakotas in the earliest days baptisms, weddings. Shivarees, and funerals were often community affairs. Weddings in Kansas dugouts often brought so many neighbors that they had to move outside for the feasting and dancing. At Bell’s Lake, Iowa, worship was
held in homes before the public services, reminiscent of Puritan family prayers, but Bell’s Lake was an unusual community with a religious base. Elsewhere most cases of community-oriented families came from the earliest dugout times. In the great thrust of the plains experience “the hearth of the lonely farm” was the center, with otherwise only kin and a few neighborly connections binding people together.

In fact, the family persisted through desperate circumstances. Children sometimes retained the family unit long after parents had died. A seventeen-year-old girl in early Texas, for example, maintained a house of seven brothers and sisters. A sixteen-year-old boy alone supervised two siblings. The community did not intervene in these situations unless the arrangement proved absolutely impossible.

Although often enough denied, social and economic class lines were always evident on the frontier. Some people lived in dugouts, and some in houses of pine boards. There was never any doubt in the mind of Allie Wallace that the Stewarts, who had built the biggest house in the area, were in a “different” category from the Germans and Russians in the neighborhood. She drew her “class” lines by means of the shawls of the immigrant women, their unshapely bodies from bearing babies, and the strict discipline their children received. These were hardly satisfactory guides to class distinctions, but they existed. Class consciousness was blurred, of course, by the proud equality stemming from shared hardships.

Still the community of endurance could not last indefinitely. For one thing, it was subject to invasions from outside. Think of land agents, “the wool hat people” as Grace Fairchild called them, filtering into a community’s space. Mrs. Fairchild would give them a bed, meat, potatoes, and “spud varnish” for twenty-five cents, but the presence of these speculators did not please her, as if they embodied a vaguely threatening force. Seth Humphrey was playing a similarly invasive role when he came into Nebraska as a mortgage agent. He lodged with farm families but always left fifty cents on the table, symbol of the gulf between them. He noted too that as soon as a house was identified as a foreclosure the settlers quickly stole the movables. The same property was safe for months if the owner was only temporarily away. Humphrey told of a man named George who had combined with a fellow homesteader to build one house squarely across their common section line. Inside the house they dutifully slept and lived each over his own land. But the friend gave up and let the mortgage company foreclose. When Humphrey arrived, George was hitching a team to the house to pull it entirely on his own land. Humphrey protested. The man firmly explained, “I’m not touching yours; I’m pulling mine and yours is following.” Knowing the climate of opinion, the mortgage man did not interfere. . . .

The environment, the place, inspired a community of hardship, but it also injected a constant dilution of community caused by separation. Even the cooperation of exchanging work and the emotionally warming social events and revivals seemed to be measures of separation rather than cornerstones in community. Altruism, heroic and soul-stirring as it was, remained individualistic, not group-oriented. The family, dominant, vital, clung to itself. Growing class distinctions, especially after the community of hardship was suspended and national economic forces pushed in, worked against unity. Thus the total experience was of limited associations, not genuine
community. Grace Snyder's brooding thoughts of death as a child on the Nebraska prairie had foreshadowed the unusual difficulties faced by community on the plains.