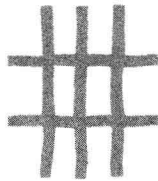


*William
Least Heat-Moon*

PrairyErth

(a deep map)



A PETER DAVISON BOOK

Houghton Mifflin Company

BOSTON

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PrairyErth speaks in many voices. The author thanks
the numerous writers, alive and dead, whose descriptions
of Chase County and Kansas and the American prairie,
indeed the globe itself, have informed and advised
him — and contributed to the scope and substance of
the Commonplace Books.

Acknowledgments for the use of lengthy quotations
from previously published works are given on page 624.

FOR LKT:
TO THE PRAIRIE
IN A
DREAMTIME LILAC BUSH

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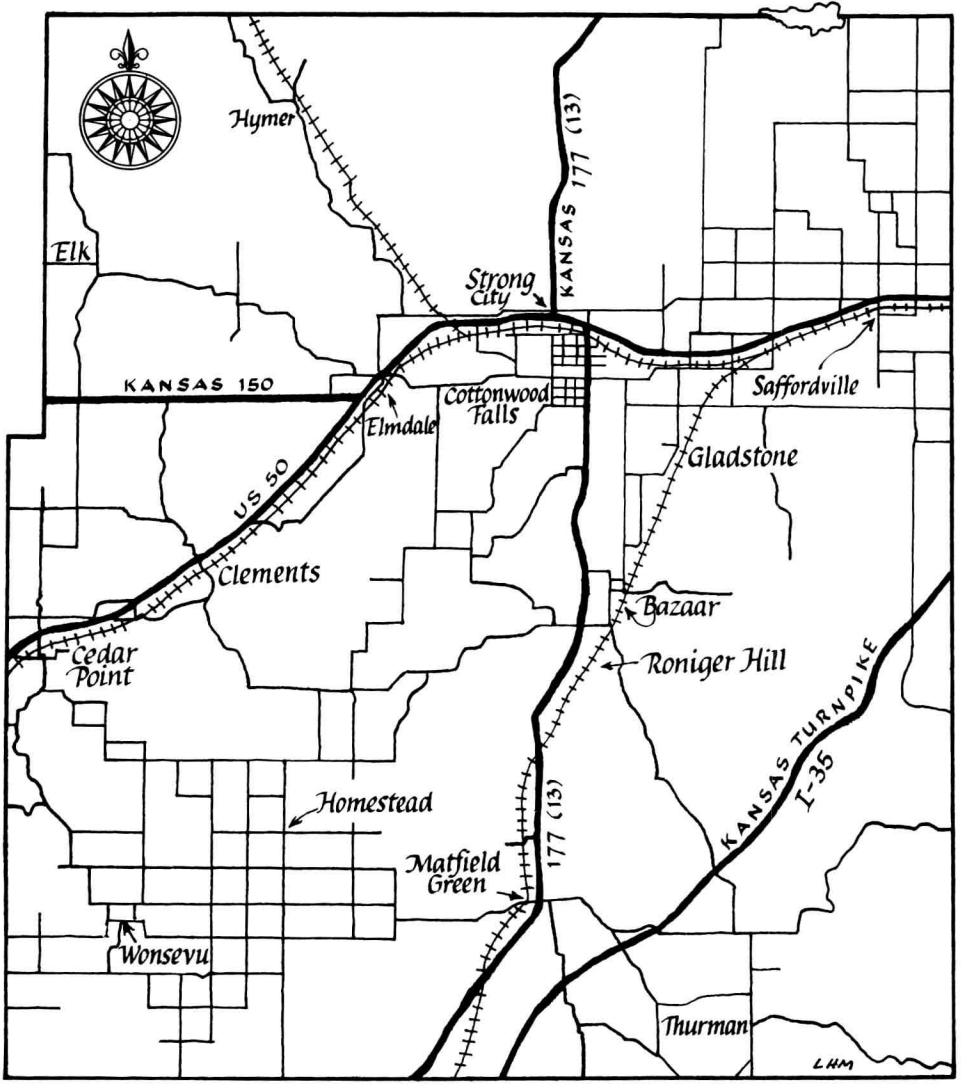
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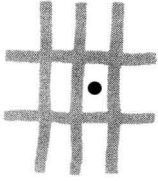
Crossings





CHASE COUNTY, KANSAS

SCALE: $\frac{3}{16}$ inch = 1 mile



From the *Commonplace Book*: Crossings

WHAT TO TAKE: Let your trunk, if you have to buy one, be of moderate size and of the strongest make. Test it by throwing it from the top of a three-storied house; if you pick it up uninjured, it will do to go to Kansas. Not otherwise.

— James Redpath and Richard Hinton,
Hand-Book to Kansas Territory (1859)

The stranger [to Kansas], if he listened to the voice of experience, would not start upon his pilgrimage at any season of the year without an overcoat, a fan, a lightning rod, and an umbrella.

— John James Ingalls,
“In Praise of Blue Grass” (1875)

It was probably necessary that we develop an American name system, for many of our native soils are unique and should bear their own identities. In a stroke of scientific shorthand, the soils of our central grasslands are sometimes called simply “prairyerths.”

— John Madson,
Where the Sky Began (1982)

I would like to tell you how to get there so that you may see all this for yourself. But first a warning: you may already have come across a set of detailed instructions, a map with every bush and stone clearly marked, the meandering courses of dry rivers and other geographical

features noted, with dotted lines put down to represent the very faintest of trails. Perhaps there were also warnings printed in tiny red letters along the margin, about the lack of water, the strength of the wind and the swiftness of the rattlesnakes. Your confidence in these finely etched maps is understandable, for at first glance they seem excellent, the best a man is capable of; but your confidence is misplaced. Throw them out. They are the wrong sort of map. They are too thin. They are not the sort of map that can be followed by a man who knows what he is doing. The coyote, even the crow, would regard them with suspicion.

— Barry Lopez,
Desert Notes (1976)

Maps are a way of organizing wonder.

— Peter Steinhart,
"Names on a Map" (1986)

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.

— N. Scott Momaday,
The Way to Rainy Mountain (1969)

Our present "leaders" — the people of wealth and power — do not know what it means to take a place seriously: to think it worthy, for its own sake, of love and study and careful work. They cannot take any place seriously because they must be ready at any moment, by the terms of power and wealth in the modern world, to destroy any place.

— Wendell Berry,
"Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse"
(1991)

All nature is so full, that that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined.

— Gilbert White,
*The Natural History and Antiquities
of Selborne* (1768)

You expect to wait. You expect night to come. Morning. Winter to set in. But you expect sometime [the land] will loosen in pieces to be examined.

— Barry Lopez,
Desert Notes (1976)

I like to think of landscape not as a fixed place but as a path that is unwinding before my eyes, under my feet.

To see and know a place is a contemplative act. It means emptying our minds and letting what is there, in all its multiplicity and endless variety, come in.

— Gretel Ehrlich,
"Landscape," introduction to *Legacy of Light* (1987)

Eternal prairie and grass, with occasional groups of trees. [Captain John] Frémont prefers this to every other landscape. To me it is as if someone would prefer a book with blank pages to a good story.

— Charles Preuss,
Exploring with Frémont (1842)

Tourists through Kansas would call this place dull enough, but then so much of the interest of a place depends on its traditions. For a passing traveler in search of pleasure, it certainly possesses few attractions. But a [correspondent], in pursuit of useful knowledge for the reading public, observes things differently.

— Henry Stanley,
My Early Travels and Adventures in America (1867)

No one, I discover, begins to know the real geographic, democratic, indissoluble American Union in the present, or suspect it in the future, until he explores these Central States, and dwells awhile on their prairies or amid their busy towns.

— Walt Whitman,
Specimen Days (1879)

The prairie, in all its expressions, is a massive, subtle place, with a long history of contradiction and misunderstanding. But it is worth the effort at comprehension. It is, after all, at the center of our national identity.

— Wayne Fields,
"Lost Horizon" (1988)

I have resented that prairie was not an Indian word. It should have been, and sounds as if it might have been. The one thing the Indian came nearer owning than any other, was prairie.

America's unique province is her prairie, [yet] how slightlying American authors have behaved toward the prairie.

— William A. Quayle,
The Prairie and the Sea (1905)

So far as we know, no modern poet has written of the Flint Hills, which is surprising since they are perfectly attuned to his lyre. In their physical characteristics they reflect want and despair. A line of low-flung hills stretching from the Osage Nation on the south to the Kaw River on the north, they present a pinched and frowning face to those who gaze on them. Their verbiage is scant. Jagged rocks rise everywhere to their surface. The Flint Hills never laugh. In the early spring when the sparse grass first turns to green upon them, they smile saltily and sardonically. But, as spring turns to summer, they grow sullen again and hopeless. Death is no stranger to them. For there nature struggles always to survive.

— Jay E. House,
Philadelphia Public Ledger (1931)

Some persons have failed to see anything beautiful in this region, and the hills have been called "barren" and "depressing." Perhaps the Flint Hills are more pleasing when they are at least in part understood.

— J. M. Jewett,
*Second Geologic Field Conference in
the Flint Hills Guidebook* (1958)

The statistics of the census tables are more eloquent than the tropes and phrases of the rhetorician. The story of Kansas needs no reinforcement from the imagination.

Kansas is the navel of the nation.

— John James Ingalls,
"Kansas: 1541-1891" (1892)

Take it by any standard you please, Kansas is not in it.

— William Allen White,
"What's the Matter with Kansas?"
(1896)

When anything is going to happen in this country, it happens first in Kansas.

— William Allen White,
Editorial, *Emporia Gazette* (1922)

Kansas is no mere geographical expression, but a "state of mind," a religion, and a philosophy in one.

The Kansas spirit is the American spirit double-distilled. It is a new-grafted product of American individualism, American idealism, American intolerance. Kansas is America in microcosm: as America conceives itself in respect to Europe, so Kansas conceives itself in respect to America.

— Carl Becker,
"Kansas" (1910)

Before Kansas could legally acquire title to public land the federal government had to clear the way. The Indian title had to be extinguished and public surveys carried out preliminary to the opening of a land office. A surveyor general for Kansas and Nebraska was appointed in August, 1854, and three months later surveying began. . . . No mapping has ever so profoundly affected the physical appearance of land as did the township surveying method. Those who have flown over Kansas can appreciate its results. Visibly the land is divided into endlessly repeated squares, reflecting the pattern of survey and sale. Road building and farming generally follow the pattern marked out by the General Land Office.

— Robert W. Baughman,
Kansas in Maps (1961)

County lines do make separate kinds of community life, each a little different from the other.

— William Allen White,
Chase County Historical Sketches
(1940)

It is the nature of the soil to be highly complex and variable, to conform very inexactly to human conclusions and rules. It is itself easily damaged by the imposition of alien patterns. Out of the random grammar and lexicon of possibilities — geological, topographical, climatological, biological — the soil of any one place makes its own peculiar and inevitable sense.

It is impossible to contemplate the life of the soil for very long without seeing it as analogous to the life of the spirit.

— Wendell Berry,
The Unsettling of America (1977)

Words are the daughters of earth, and things are the sons of heaven.

— Samuel Johnson (paraphrasing Samuel Madden),
A Dictionary of the English Language (1755)

In anthropology now, the term “thick description” refers to a dense accumulation of ordinary information about a culture, as opposed to abstract or theoretical analysis. It means observing the details of life until they begin to coagulate or cohere into an interpretation. . . . I’d like to see thick description make a comeback. Apart from sheer sensuous pleasure, it gives you the comforting feeling that you’re not altogether adrift, that at least you have an actual context to enter into and real things to grapple with. The protectors of the environment are a powerful group in the United States. Perhaps they should extend their concern to the country of the imagination.

— Anatole Broyard,
New York Times Book Review (1985)

The European writing I know rarely recognizes a power in the land that corresponds to a power of being, while one of the things that distinguishes American literature, especially in the West, is that you expect to see the land turn up in a powerful or a mysterious or an affecting way.

— Barry Lopez,
 “An Interview,” in *Western American Literature* (1986)

The indivisible is not to be put into compartments.

Every fact is a logarithm; one added term ramifies it until it is thoroughly transformed. In the general aspect of things, the great lines of creation take shape and arrange themselves into groups; beneath lies the unfathomable.

Which of our methods of measuring could we apply to this eddying mass that is the universe? In the presence of the profundities our sole ability is to dream. Our conception, quickly winded, cannot follow creation, that vast breath.

— Victor Hugo,
The Toilers of the Sea (1866)

Our religion is the traditions of our ancestors — the visions of our sachems and the dreams of our old men, given them in the solemn hours of night by the Great Spirit — and it is written in the hearts of our people.

— Chief Seattle,
“Address to Governor Isaac Stevens”
(1855)

The Dreaming is the founding story, the great drama of the creative era, in which the landscape took its present form and the people, animals, plants, and elements of the known world were created. But the Dreaming is also the inner or spiritual dimension of the present. Things contain their own histories. There is no contrast of the natural and the spiritual, and there is no geography without history and meaning. The land is already a narrative — an artefact of intellect — before people represent it.

In the Dreaming, heroic characters travelled about the land, doing the ordinary good and evil things people do today, and also performing extraordinary feats of creation and destruction, cooperation and conflict. These characters, the Ancestral Beings, who are also called the Dreamings, have their visible manifestations now in the form of animals, plants, elements, places, and people.

— Peter Sutton,
Exhibition brochure for “Dreamings:
The Art of Aboriginal Australia”
(1988)

Geography blended with time equals destiny.

— Joseph Brodsky,
“Strophes” (1978)

The moment comes: we intersect a history, a long existence, offering it our fresh discovery as regeneration.

— Shirley Hazzard,
“Points of Departure” (1983)

New earths, new themes expect us.

— Henry David Thoreau,
The Journal (1857)