

## *The Interior Borderlands: Regional Identity in the Midwest and Great Plains*

by Jon K. Lauck

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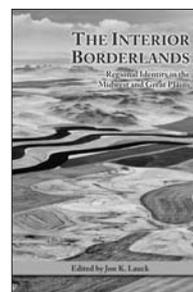
*The Interior Borderlands: Regional Identity in the Midwest and Great Plains* grew out of a 2015 conference, *Where the West Begins*. John Lauck, the volume editor, assembled a panel on the topic "Where Does the Midwest End and the Great Plains Begin?" Responses to that question along with characterizations of the two regions run throughout the book's twenty chapters. Professor Lauck's comprehensive introduction provides the broad historical context. He asserts that between the American Midwest and the Great Plains, there is a transition zone that he describes as a borderland. Lauck calls that zone the Center Line, a fifty-mile-wide area straddling both sides of the 100th meridian that extends through North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, the country's central heartland. For Lauck, it is important to name this boundary in order to "embrace the power of place and spatial differentiation" (p. xxvi). He does not want these regions and subregions to be ignored and made into "forgettable dots" on the map. This volume is a call to identify a boundary between regions and to affirm the value and virtue of the two regions under threat.

The twin themes of the fertile Midwest and the barren Great Plains have a deep history derived in part from the fact that those who explored the regions came from humid environments. John Wesley Powell in the nineteenth century and Walter Prescott Webb in the twentieth identified boundaries between the regions, and their contributions to the study of these regions and their environmental histories are significant.

The Midwest played a major role in American development in the nineteenth century, and Great Plains settlement flourished by the end of the century, which led to both regions reaching their apex of significance in the 1910s. After World War I, the Midwest found itself intellectually ignored, and the Great Plains began its long demographic decline. Eventually the stereotype of "flyover country" became attached to both regions.

In addressing the "borderlands" issue, various contributors to this volume seek to identify a specific boundary. Eventually, most agree with geographer Christopher Laingon, who suggests that the borderlands are a fuzzy, gradual transition zone between the two regions. These regions changed over time; consequently, "static and foundational regions" do not exist (p. 6). In terms of agriculture, there has been a blurring of previous differences between the regions; for example, corn production now flourishes on the Great Plains. Michael J. Mullin, in the concluding chapter, argues that the two regions were "historically fluid," and his survey of academics seeking to identify boundaries of the Midwest and the Great Plains (with accompanying maps) reveals quite diverse views.

The volume contributors explore many topics to identify differences between the Midwest and the Great Plains. With the aid of landscape photography, James Aber and Susan Aber focus on Kansas in seeking a precise boundary between the Midwest and the Great Plains. James Davis compares a county in Illinois with a county in South Dakota to highlight differences between



the two regions. Cattlemen occupied the arid plains of western Nebraska and had trouble selling their holdings, according to Matthew Luckett's account. Maria Howe assesses the failure of a Missouri Valley Authority in the 1940s and 1950s in light of regional conflicts. The contrast between Powell's view of the arid plains and William Gilpin's grand aspirations for the same region is chronicled by Will Weaver. Hamlin Garland's experiences in the Midwest and the Great Plains borderlands is described in the chapter by Lance Nixon.

Modern women's memoirs from both regions are analyzed by Rachael Hanel, while Debbie Hanson considers community cookbooks as a reflection of regional folkways. David Pichaske focuses on midwestern literature and seeks to identify the prairie eye and the prairie voice. The "new Western history" is taken to task by Natalie Massip for overemphasizing myth busting and failing to see the need for a more complex study of regions in the West. Anna Thompson Hajdik addresses the cinematic representations of "flyover country." Joseph D. Schiller provides a Native American perspective; he notes that midwestern tribes were viewed as peaceful, while Plains tribes were considered warlike. Mara W. Ionannides contrasts the experiences of Jews in the traditional Midwest with the experiences of the Jews who ventured onto the Great Plains. Jay Price uses religion to explore the Midwest-Southeast region, focusing on Wichita, Kansas. With emphasis on human agency in the Midwest-Great Plains transition zone, Paula M. Nelson chronicles the successful lives of various individuals who settled in the Dakota regions.

Two chapters stand out in offering significantly different approaches to the study of these regions. Gleaves Whitney argues that a "real" borderland formed when the Spanish, French, and Anglo-Americans began marrying, trading with, and living with the diverse tribes in the regions and created a cultural borderland that formed a "cultural core" in its own right. These cultural estuaries existed for a few generations and were squeezed out by the grip of an American empire.

Julie Courtright's fascinating study of the historical environment of the Great Plains-Midwest challenges the notions that aridity and agriculture define these regions. She focuses on the ways in which "grass" (and wind and fire) gives commonality to the entire region. Courtright describes how Euro-American settlers launched a campaign to suppress and banish fire from the landscape, even though fire had played a fundamental role in nurturing the native environment. She wants us to understand the lasting impacts of historical environments.

The contributors here provide a rich array of ideas regarding the borderlands between the Midwest and Great Plains. The more we understand these borderlands, the greater our appreciation will be of the forces that shaped them and us.

*Reviewed by Ramon Powers, former executive director, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.*