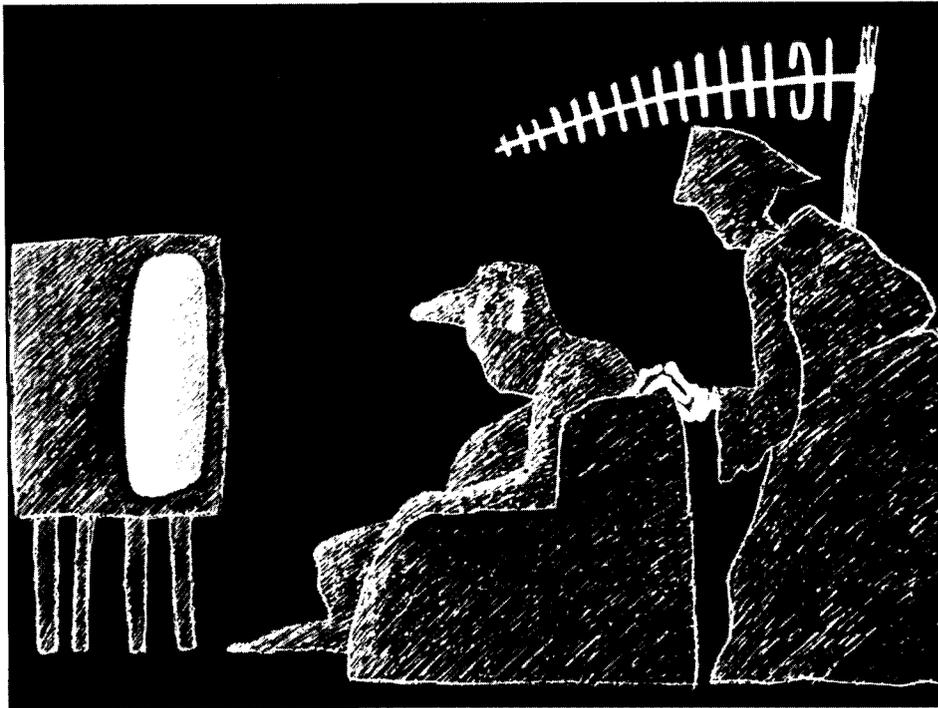


The Plains States and America's Future

by Anthony Harrigan



Igor Kopelnitsky

The halls and vast columned spaces of the St. Scholastica convent in Atchison, Kansas, are dark and empty now. The sisters who filled these buildings with busy religious life for several generations are dead or departed into the secular world with the virtual demise of convent life as a result of Vatican II. I talk quietly in a corner of the chapel with an aged nun who remains true to her vows and who, after 60 years as a religious, is dutiful, obedient, and devoted. The world is full of disappearing or vanished eras, and the ordered life of a large convent, grounded in the ancient ways of Christendom, is only one of many forms of existence that have been damaged by time's relentless flood.

The end is all around us in life, as small and large epochs are eclipsed. In small towns and great cities entire communities lie asleep in graveyards, marked only by weathering letters on marble markers. Life that is so vivid for a little while quickly becomes lost from sight. With each generation there is a new, albeit ephemeral phase of modernity, which in time fades away. Civilized life is periodic in character. In Atchison, London, New York, Mexico City, or wherever, the vibrant structures of a decade, generation, or century soon become skeletons. Entire eras, like individuals, disappear unless uncovered and brought to life by scholars, writers, and moralists.

Only in the historical mind's eye do the human actors and patterns of a past time live in glowing detail. Fragments survive, of course, and this is good. French architect Le Corbusier, writing in *When the Cathedrals were White*, said that "there

are living pasts and dead pasts. Some parts are the liveliest investigators of the present and the best springboards into the future." But the corpus of an era, the rich fabric of another age, is usually lost from sight. The obliteration of a world is a cruel process because so much human energy, imagination, belief, and effort go into the construction of any era, no matter how brief. To have a generation's work covered over so quickly makes life itself seem terrifyingly transient, and one's own time seems dangerously imperiled even as one lives it. Hence the desire on the part of archaeologists to preserve or recover pieces of the fabric of an earlier life, whether public buildings or places of worship. These searchers after a buried past delight in comprehending the customs, mores, language, pleasures, sorrows, and dreams of people whose epoch has ended. America, despite its brief history, has seen an extraordinary number of distinct eras, and despite the fact that America is the land of the bulldozer, where "progress" has been worshiped and "urban renewal" has meant the obliteration of handsome, ordered communities, vestiges of other eras remain and are increasingly cherished.

One such place where a portion of the past survives, a place off the beaten track of contemporary life, is Atchison, Kansas. High on a bluff above the Missouri River stands a remarkable collection of homes built by railroad executives, real estate barons, and prominent merchants in the late 19th century. Amelia Farhart, the pioneer aviatrix, grew up in one of the oldest homes here, a Browning cottage built in 1850. Nearby are numerous opulent mansions built in the 1870's and 1890's. The stained glass windows, parquet floors, gaslights, Romanesque columns, towers, and turrets testify to the imagination and inventiveness of the original owners who commis-

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sioned these dwelling places. The survival of the structural shell of a house is not enough to bring alive a vanished time. Fortunately, it sometimes happens that the interior furnishings of a house remain as they were when the dwelling was a frame for family life. In one such house in Atchison, the furnishings include a great variety of personal possessions of the original owners so that it is possible to get the feel of a bygone time in this Plains state. In the Evan C. Cray home, the world of the 1880's is revealed in the old Corona typewriter, the harpsichord and Packard parlor organ, the baby carriage, youth chair, icebox, and butcher's block. To be sure, wallpaper, carving, and ornamental glass cannot reveal the inner lives of the inhabitants. One can only guess at their ambitions, affections, disappointments, and anxieties.

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From the perspective of modern life, the old house on the bluff at Atchison appears extraordinarily placid and free of stress. We forget that death was with the generation of the 1880's to a degree unknown in middle-class America in the 1990's. Medical care was of the most primitive sort. A child's earache could be fatal. Appendicitis was a catastrophe without remedy. A father or mother could be taken away from a family after an illness of a day or two. A family might well experience the loss of one or more children in their infancy or pre-adult years. My own paternal great-grandparents, William and Ellen Rodgers Harrigan, had 13 children, of which only four survived to adulthood. It was said that a black funeral wreath was always on the door of their home on Scammel Street in New York City. The sufferings of the times shaped the character of men and women, either destroying them or steeling them for a harsh life, making them exceptionally strong. The reality of suffering undoubtedly accounts for their reliance on the consolation of religion and for church building and church attendance. In our time, insulated as we are by modern medicine, suffering, when it comes, is more of a shock, more devastating in its unexpectedness.

The photography of the 1880's and 1890's sheds light on the attitudes of the times. The faces in so many family pictures are stony and devoid of humor. Perhaps it was the more openly Darwinian character of society that accounts for the grim outlook reflected in the photographs of people young and old. If they looked grim, one also has to bear in mind that there was not only the constant threat of fatal illness but the absence of any safety net under the vast majority of people. It was a

world of hardship and deprivation for people in the more humble walks of life, certainly in the isolated communities of the Plains states. The shanties in towns and cities have not survived, but we know that bringing in coal and wood and taking out ashes were demanding tasks in an era when "the survival of the fittest" made little allowance for those who were not fit or who lacked stamina, education, or opportunity.

The inner life of communities on the Plains in the 1880's, or any other chapter of history, is impossible to recreate in its entirety—even when there are literary remains or letters to study. Some eras are notable for the candor of the people, but people in other eras—the Victorian period, for one—were extremely reticent. Jeanne S. Richardson, in *Here Lies Sioux Falls* (1992), takes a penetrating look at the lives and deaths of a number of the men and women of Sioux Falls of yesteryear, beginning with the settlement of the city on the treeless plain adjacent to the great falls of the Sioux River. The earliest years of the settlement of Sioux Falls in the Dakota Territory were the classic Western story of danger from hostile Indians and of the safeguarding of villagers by the U.S. Cavalry. Life involved occupations, ills, hardships, and joys that were peculiar to the time and are not features of modern life. The dread diseases were typhoid, diphtheria, tuberculosis, scarlet fever, and pneumonia. Farmers outside the city were confronted with grasshopper plagues. An ordinary home in the 1870's cost \$800, but the rich on "Nob Hill" sometimes paid as much as \$10,000 for a brick mansion. Livery stables and hack services were essential to community life. Progress meant cement sidewalks and brick streets. A prosperous citizen might be a brewmaster who owned a malting works. A major project in Minnehaha County was the building of the Odd Fellows Hall or a courthouse made of quartzite. Many parents of Sioux Falls citizens were homesteaders. The streets were filled with hay-hauling wagons. Children were born at home. The Catholic faith was taken to outlying areas of South Dakota in a railway car fitted out as a chapel. Men spent their lives as brakemen on trains. A prominent Sioux Falls citizen who died in another city might be brought home on a special funeral train. A business secret of the time might involve the procedure for making stone-cutting tools. In the dark of the night men were known to lose their lives as the result of a hit-and-run wagon or carriage. All this made for a very different texture of life—a texture utterly dissimilar from our own.

The hazards of life were no different in nearby Nebraska of the same period. In his biography of Loren Eiseley, Gale E. Christianson documents the disasters that struck the grandfather of this Nebraska-born naturalist, essayist, and poet: the arrival of the financial panic of 1893, drought, the collapse of a sugar beet business, bankruptcy, and the consequent necessity to eke out a meager existence on a \$22.50 monthly Civil War pension.

Though the promise of the 20th century fired the imagination of those who were adults at the turn of the century—particularly with the arrival of the automobile, which radically altered both rural and urban life—it was not a time of unalloyed blessings for the people of the Plains states. In many ways, economic life seemed much less free than in the 1880's. There was a keen awareness of the harsh dominance of Eastern capital, which produced severe political fallout. There was a growing belief that the agriculturists of the Plains were beholden to or the victims of bankers, railroad magnates, and

grain elevator owners in the East. The farmers of the Plains states found themselves in steadily worsening trouble, and the Grand Old Party, which had commanded almost universal loyalty for a long time after the Civil War, was viewed as being in the grip of the Eastern interests and unwilling to help the people and areas that produced so much of the nation's food supply. The country was turning into an industrial society under the control of huge corporate entities, and farmers were no longer regarded, as Thomas Jefferson had described them, as "the chosen people of God." By the 1890's, the price of wheat had fallen 50 cents a bushel. An antifarmer bias had begun to develop in the big Eastern cities, a bias that continues today, as evidenced by a recent description on public television of rural people as "hay shakers."

The Eastern interests had taken advantage of the commercial opportunities presented by the opening of new farmlands worldwide—from Australia to Argentina and from Canada to Russia—and the people of the Plains states, many of them from Central and Eastern Europe, feared a new vassalage—the development of fiefdoms held by great aggregations of money. Monopolistic railroads overcharged for carrying crops to market. Grain elevators owned outside the region charged exorbitant fees for storage of farm products. A catastrophic deflation, beneficial to the money power of the East, produced a new politics in the region, a politics embodied in the ideas and speeches of William Jennings Bryan. His populist views as editor of the *Omaha World-Herald* were those of much of the region, and the latter found full expression in Bryan's historic "Cross of Gold" speech and his powerful warnings against "the bondage of debt." This antagonism toward the money power of the East led to demands for a federal income tax, an eight-hour work day, and regulation of railroads and utilities and produced such developments as the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, with establishment of a state-owned bank and a state-owned elevator, institutions which exist to this day. Thus, the seeds of the New Deal were planted at the turn of the century, and at the end of the 20th century there remains a strong feeling in the Plains states that the farming region is still a colony of the East, a colony in which the farm population is supposed to produce the cities' food supplies for a pittance.

The Plains states continue to feel pressures from the big cities on the two coasts, though the strongest pressures are now cultural rather than economic. The great cities, in the eyes of Middle Americans, no longer seem great in the way they were regarded a century ago. The crowded coastal urban regions are widely viewed as hostile to civilized life, as centers of crime and other forms of disorder. As a gas-station attendant in Wamego, Kansas, put it to me when I stopped in a rental car, "I see you come from a district of crime." For students of the human spirit in America, there is poignancy in this public perception. What started out as a noble experiment has degenerated into something resembling the lower depths of the Roman Empire in its time of sharpest decline. In Middle America people refer to Washington as "out there," and "out there" is not an attractive destination at the end of the 20th century.

Gradually, in many parts of the country, there is emerging an awareness that the good life is to be found in the heartland. *Money* magazine, in late 1992, gave Sioux Falls, South Dakota, top ranking for quality of life. The major population centers of East and West, the symbols of urban life in the United States, are accurately seen as places where behavior and communication have been brutalized in ways unimaginable when the

century opened. Richard Critchfield, an authority on rural life and the Third World, asks this telling question in *Trees, Why Do You Wait? America's Changing Rural Culture* (1991): "Who would talk of remaking the world in our image?" Yes, who would want our deculturated cities that are going over the civilizational brink?

This was not the case with the world of Atchison, Kansas, in the 1880's, or of Omaha or St. Paul in 1900. Then, America represented a strong social order that was closely linked with the civilizational order of the countries whence our immigrant peoples originated. Today, the mechanisms for the effective transmission of Western culture—the schools and media—are morally decayed. They promote instability and neopagan alternative lifestyles that undermine a civilized existence. The horizons of the New Age culture of the 1990's are based upon self-satisfaction, a material and sensual nature, a do-anything, do-as-you-please view.

To find something better, one needs to trek inland, into the more lightly populated, less corrupted parts of the nation where civilized horizons continue to be recognized and where there is a good measure of continuity between generations. "King numbers," to use a phrase of John Randolph of Roanoke, does not reign in the heartland with the absolute power evidenced in the heavily populated cities of bicoastal America. The stratification of life is not as marked; the essential condition of a civilized community, personal safety, continues to exist outside the crowded centers.

Historians of the future, when analyzing the final decade of the 20th century, are likely to look back and ask what happened to the promise of the century and why Americans did not move promptly and effectively to deal with all the unhappy developments in their society. Mirroring the Romans' failure to arrest the decadence that proved their undoing, scholars may conclude that a kind of moral paralysis overcame the country, starting in the 1960's and accelerating into the 1990's. When and where did the loss of community take place? How were the social sanctions, established a century or more earlier, undermined?

They were undermined, of course. In a mental back-to-the-future exercise, a kind of future time warp, we might see that the final two decades of this century in the United States had parallels with the life experience of people elsewhere in the modernized world—the world of advanced but destabilizing technology. Vaclav Havel wrote a brilliant essay on the contemporary human dilemma entitled "The End of the Modern Era" in 1992. His essay applies as much to America as to Czechs. He warned that we see our ills as technical defects that can be solved by technology alone. He warned that we must abandon the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved, "a machine with instructions for use waiting to be discovered, a body of information to be fed into a computer in the hope that, sooner or later, it will spit out a universal solution." This attitude colors all aspects of contemporary life.

The way forward, he rightly said, "is not in the mere construction of universal systemic solutions." It is getting to the heart of reality through personal experience, through the restoration of personal relationships and personal visions. The curse of our times is impersonality, secularism, abstraction, universalist ideologies, and over-reliance on technical approaches to everything. We stressed personal insights and spirituality in earlier eras, but we somehow lost this in an absurd reliance on supposedly scientific representations and sociological statistics.

We think “agribusiness” instead of family farm. President Havel made the sage comment that we should seek “new and better ways of managing society, the economy and the world,” and these new and better ways, if they represent a personal approach, are likely to be close to the old, traditional ways that were widely rejected in recent decades. In other words, the authentically postmodern should bear a close resemblance to the premodern, for we would be returning to and reinforcing the permanent things.

What will Americans of 2030 think when they walk the streets of New York and Los Angeles as we walk the streets of the 19th-century towns? We cherish the remains of the older towns and cities and take pride in the lives that created those communities and formed the character of those times. It is hard to imagine any thoughtful, civilized American of 2030 looking at the 1980’s and 1990’s and having similar feelings of pride. In fact, New York and Los Angeles and other aggregations of mass humanity may not even exist then in a recognizable way. They may have imploded, with responsible law-abiding, self-reliant citizens fleeing their precincts, leaving behind masses of irresponsible, lawless, dependent proletarians inhabiting a near-wasteland. Already masses of young men who are unfit for anything but a life of crime fill the big cities, where car theft is a rite of passage and where indiscriminate, drive-by shootings have reduced streets to the condition of Beirut. And the flight from these cities has indeed begun. I think of a financial-district worker in New York City who moved his family to peaceful upstate New York because his seven-year-old daughter had a pistol aimed at her in a city public school. Not only are concerned citizens fleeing the big cities but significant sectors of business as well. New York City and Los Angeles have lost much of their manufacturing base. In 1992 there were fewer manufacturing jobs in the Los Angeles metropolitan area than in 1972, though the population of the area has increased by two million in the same period. Kevin L. Kearns, writing in the *Washington Post*, reported that Japanese companies have decided to locate their plants “away from central cities” in “an attempt to avoid dealing with minority populations.”

The Plains states and other parts of the American mid-continent are likely to play a significant role in American life in the future if there is to be a reinvigoration of American spirit by the middle of the 21st century. In this connection, it is important to recognize that this region played a vital role in the introduction of humane reforms in the final years of the 19th and early years of the 20th centuries. So, in the generation or more ahead, it is likely to play an equally important role in the healing and strengthening of American culture.

The ability of this region to serve in a healing capacity stems from the fact that it is the most rural part of the United States, the region where the core values of the older America continue to operate and where the sick lifestyles of alternative cultures gain few adherents. Richard Critchfield argues persuasively that “there is simply no substitute for the farm and small community when it comes to forming human culture.” Historian Mark Malvasi of the University of Alabama highlights the civilizational task of upholding “humanity, discipline, restraint and above all deference to an ancestral authority,” which aptly describes what the peoples of the Plains states do in their personal and community lives. Their manner of life is different from that of the millions in the giant cities of the East and

West. Here are millions who, in the words of Professor Malvasi, “celebrate the autonomy of the individual liberated from the bonds of community.”

To be sure, even the most stable and sound regions of the United States are endangered by the assault on decency carried out by the entertainment industry. With their television programs filled with sex—often perverted sex—and violence, the American people are subjected to a brutalization process that dwarfs anything ever conducted by totalitarian regimes of the past. Even *Newsweek*, which usually accepts the twisted mores of contemporary television and motion pictures, wrote that the NBC network’s fall 1992 series *I Witness Video* was “an exercise in necroshock (that) comes from the pits of the porn trade.” Other networks and cable operations tear at the fabric of our culture, civilization, and moral life by offering programs that approve of homosexuality, sadism, and every other conceivable form of depravity. These programs wash across the minds of the American young and old and introduce fantasies of the most pathological type. The *Today Show* on NBC, for example, devoted part of its September 16, 1992, program to the “etiquette” of condom use, discussing whether the man or woman, or both, should carry condoms on a date. The underlying assumption was that there is not a moral aspect to sex.

The Most Reverend James Sullivan, bishop of Fargo, North Dakota, made this point to me—the corrupting influence of television—in a summer 1992 interview. He warned against acceptance of what is deemed suitable by the force of public opinion in a corrupted era, saying:

The problem we face in this country is almost exactly the same as was evidenced in the French Revolution, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. A cultural revolution in our society has taken place slowly, almost imperceptibly, during the past 30 or 40 years. The sovereignty of God has been replaced by the “god” of public opinion. The United States seems to be driven by the force of what the majority of the people feels the best for them—regardless of any higher law. All forms of sin and perversion can be justified by making an appeal to the omniscient forces of public opinion.

And the situation will only get worse as the greed of the entertainment moguls and advertisers force ever more sordid and sick “entertainment” on Americans of all ages. This forced feeding of filth has to be resisted by the American people if all the work of the moral institutions in society is not to be undone, if the United States is not to be turned into a corpse of a free society on the legislative, judicial, and constitutional levels. As the former chief of police in Washington, D.C., Isaac Fulwood, pointed out in his resignation speech, “the media glamorizes sexually explicit videos such as those of the rap group 2 Live Crew” and are guilty of “putting the finger on the trigger.”

Fortunately, history tells us that counterforces to degeneration and nihilism appear in the darkest places and forms. For example, in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Lincoln, Nebraska, there is the tiny St. Tikhon Russian Orthodox Church and monastery, where prayers are offered around the clock by devoted monks and where the abbot calls on his parishioners to be “God-inspired outspokeners” and to take action when one sees “a sound recording you believe is obscene being sold to a child or an adult.” One does not usually associate Nebraska

with Orthodoxy or with monastic life—monasticism associated with the struggle against depravity in a large urban community—but new spiritual seeds are being sowed in the capital of Nebraska, a city and a region where people are mindful of their spiritual heritage and the imperatives of human culture for a wholesome society.

From the perspective of the early 1990's, the Plains states are an increasingly important resource for the nation. In a world in which the population may double in size in a few decades, the agricultural capacity of this breadbasket region is of central importance. Its economic destiny will surely be built around its rich agricultural resources. There will be changes, of course, and one of the most important undoubtedly will be a shift in production from raw agricultural commodities to finished agricultural products. It seems inevitable that regional awareness of this will grow and that the process of agricultural development and transformation will involve the creation of a mid-continental economic alliance that will feature interstate cooperation and compacts, widening in time into a true economic community with a formal structure.

A key aspect of the region's potential is the fact that the people of the Plains states have the mental outlook of producers, whereas so many Americans today think of themselves solely as consumers. But it is not only as an agricultural resource base that the region has significance for the nation. With its excellent human stock, sense of community, strong moral base, and absence of the crowding that plagues the two coasts, the

Plains states may well harken back to the spirit and organizational initiatives of a century ago when William Jennings Bryan highlighted the need for a moral revolution in the American system. The strength and character of Plains people were manifested again during and after the Great Flood of 1993.

The national moral landscape is a near-disaster in a once truly free, morally healthy, and vigorous society. To comprehend the depths to which great population centers have sunk, one has only to look at New York City, where the school board, over the objection of concerned parents, imposed a "diversity" curriculum that seeks to erase historic teaching about the evil of sexual perversion and where small children are being subjected to sensitivity training to make them accept the idea of homosexual unions. The depravity involved in this process reminds civilized people of the efforts of Nazi school authorities in the 1930's to subvert Christian teachings. The purveyors of sick ideas seek a "final solution" to Judeo-Christian ethics, and the Plains states, as a morally healthy region, therefore represent a takeoff point for the moral revolution that American society as a whole so desperately needs as we approach the end of the millennium. This is the true and greatest significance of the mid-continental region, which has remained largely uncorrupted. Reformation from within, in the spiritual as well as the geographical sense, is a real possibility and tremendous opportunity for the people of the American interior. It is the challenge facing the mid-continent today and tomorrow.

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Metamorphosis

by Rudolph Schirmer

Earthbound, but Heaven-bent.
Schismatic situation!
No wonder that the lark
Became a happy harbinger,
The butterfly a beckoner,
The buttercup a chalice.

So it will be
When after timeless wanderings
Returning home we find
That there have been
Remodelers at work
And what was once a house
Is now a palace.