

CHAPTER 23



The Character of a People

WHAT DETERMINES THE CHARACTER of a people? As far as North Dakota is concerned, this question can be answered in terms of common experience: the conditions of existence, reflected in the history of the state, shaped the character of its people. Although there were many similarities, the North Dakota frontier was not exactly like earlier frontiers to the east or later ones to the west. Nor were the people who settled the state precisely the same mixture of diverse elements, foreign and native, who settled other parts of the nation. Inevitably, then, the character of North Dakotans had to be different in some ways from that of other Americans.

NEW HOMES, NEW PEOPLE

Formative experiences began with the arrival of the pioneers. Eric Ramstad, the first settler at Minot, remembered: “It was a wilderness; no preachers, no doctors, no neighbors, nothing; but we came out all right.” Conditions in the new land soon began to change habits and attitudes. Norway-born immigrant Andrew Vatne saw the changes clearly after revisiting his homeland. In North Dakota, he thought, the Norwegian folk—long known for their honesty, hospitality, and thrift—had acquired good manners, a greater respect for women, more democratic ideas, and less regard for class distinctions. “In Norway,” he wrote, “we were in many respects a helpless tool in the hands of the state. There we had the state church. The child must be baptized or a fine must be paid.” Another Norwegian immigrant, Ole Lima, believed that settling in the United States produced “a more wide-awake people and more independent thinking.... The Norwegian, who has lived a while in America, is more civilized than if he had not been here. He has seen more, experienced

more, thought more, and all this has opened his eyes and broadened his view.”¹ Thus Lima, farming near Cooperstown in 1907, felt that life in the New World offered abundant opportunities for self-improvement.

Long before the coming of white men, migration to the plains and prairie country had influenced the character of eastern Indian tribes. Dr. James H. Howard, an anthropologist who worked for a time at the State Historical Society and then taught for some years at the University of North Dakota, has noted that even the psychology of the Ojibways changed when they moved from their woodland home to the semiarid grassland:

[The Plains Ojibways] possess a frankness and openness of character quite different from the habitual reserve of the Woodland Ojibwa and Ottawa.... From the sparkling atmosphere of the Northern prairies, it seems, the Bungi [Ojibways] have acquired an optimism and swagger which contrasts quite sharply with the world-view of the Woodland Algonquians. It might be said to reflect the dazzling sunlight, the blue sky and waving “sea of grass” of the Plains.²

When white settlers came to North Dakota, they created a rural society, so that by the end of the First World War they were spread thinly over the state, with some 86 percent of them living in the country or in small towns. The population was only eight persons per square mile outside the dozen urban centers, and even the largest of these were only exaggerated country towns. Most of the people, of course, were farmers, and of those who were not, many were engaged in businesses, trades, or professions which served the farm population.

The influence of ruralism on the North Dakota character was matched by that of foreign origin on the population. North Dakota was unique in the extent to which these two factors were combined. In 1920 only four states had a higher percentage of foreign-born in their populations: New York (27.2 percent), Connecticut (27.4 percent), Massachusetts (28.3 percent), and Rhode Island (29 percent). Both North Dakota and Minnesota had 20.4 percent foreign-born, South Dakota 13 percent. The states with higher percentages were all much more urbanized and industrialized. In 1920, New York’s population was 82.7 percent urban, Connecticut’s 67.8 percent, Massachusetts’ 94.8 percent, and Rhode Island’s 97.5 percent. Minnesota’s was 44.1 percent urban. In North Dakota only 13.6 percent of the population was urban in 1920.

The foreign stock included not only the foreign-born but also native-born persons of foreign and mixed parentage. They made up 66.8 percent of North

¹[North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), II (1908), 198-201.

²James H. Howard, “[The Identity and Demography of the Plains-Ojibway](#),” *Plains Anthropologist: Journals of the Plains Conference*, VI (August 1961), 172.

Dakota's population in 1920. Only Rhode Island with 69.8 percent and Massachusetts with 67.1 percent had larger percentages. None of the Great Plains states had nearly as large a proportion of foreign stock as North Dakota, none were as rural. The closest was South Dakota, whose population was 48.8 percent foreign stock and 16 percent urban. Montana's was 47.5 percent foreign stock and 31.3 percent urban, Nebraska's 40.3 percent foreign stock and 31.3 percent urban.

The large foreign stock in North Dakota's population meant that most North Dakotans were undergoing the process of casting off old, traditional ways of living and thinking and adopting new ones. Part of the change was in language. In 1920 more than half of its people were bilingual, speaking both English and the language of an Old World homeland.³

Many people were not very much at home in North Dakota. Over half of the population in 1920 had not been living in the state in 1900. There were other reasons for uneasiness. Those of German descent, torn by conflicting loyalties during the First World War, had passed through an emotional crisis. Moreover, conservatives stirred up anger with loose charges that the Nonpartisan League was pro-German.

The influence of emotionalism in North Dakota history can be traced through cycles of elation and depression, experienced first by the Indian inhabitants and then by the white settlers. For the Indians, elation sprang from the presence of great herds of buffalo, from the acquisition of horses, from victory in war, from the vigor of health; depression came from absence of the herds and consequent hunger, from losing horses, from defeat in war, from the havoc of epidemics. For their part, the white traders feared the Indians and the wilderness, hoped for profits from the furs brought in by their customers.

When farmers, speculators, and railroad builders rushed into the area, they were excited by the prospects of making a fortune from wheat and rising land values. Elation gave way to depression when the Great Dakota Boom ended with drought, low prices, and a mass exodus of settlers in the late 1880's. After 1898 a second boom brought a new wave of optimism. But hope was soon replaced with feelings of being exploited by outside interests. This helped to make the Nonpartisan League a success, and when the League gained control of the state government, farmers experienced sensations of elation and power. Triumph gave way to despair and feelings of helplessness when the League failed and the 1920's and 1930's brought a long farm depression with bank failures, low prices, mortgage foreclosures, crop failures, and drought. The emotional tone of North Dakota life changed with the economic revival of the Second World War and the prosperous postwar years. Then optimism again

³United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, Vol. II, *Population, General Report and Analytical Tables*, pp. 982-985.

released the energies of the people and brought a new wave of progress.

FEELINGS OF INFERIORITY AND DEPENDENCE

While cycles of elation and depression were intermittent, other emotions were persistent. Anxiety about the weather—fear of blizzards, hail, cold, searing heat, and drought—continued through the years. Many North Dakotans felt either that their state was in a weak and inferior position in the nation or that it was so held by the majority of Americans. They felt alienated from the main stream of American life, as if they were looked down upon as inferior by the rest of the American people. Feelings of inferiority or of being considered inferior were long an important part of the emotional life of thousands of North Dakotans. People of a rural state, they felt like country cousins toward the city folk of the nation.

Indeed, something of the same feeling was a part of the undercurrent of antagonism between country and town people within the state. Many country people felt that townsmen considered themselves superior; country women were not always at ease in groups of more fashionably dressed town women. Realizing the harm such feelings might bring to their enterprises, perceptive businessmen deliberately tried to cultivate good will among farmers. Politicians discovered they could attract votes by not dressing too well. John Burke campaigned in an old sheepskin coat; William Lemke wore a cap; William Langer's suit looked as if he had slept in it for a week.

Not all country people experienced antagonism (family and business ties between town and country were often close), nor did all North Dakotans feel that they and their state were inferior. But certainly thousands of them did resent the patronizing attitude toward the state and its people that they so often met. Eric Sevareid, the well-known news commentator, remembered thinking "Why are we here on the cold, flat top of our country?" when as a boy in Velva he traced on a map "the meaningless rectangle of Dakota."

Compensation for such feelings of inferiority was natural. Many North Dakotans were, as Dr. Edward C. Blackorby has written of William Lemke, "urged on by a desire for success in the grand style." As was the case with all Americans, what North Dakotans desired were the standard American values and equality of status in the nation. Such strivings, for example, marked the "white-kid-glove era" of the 1880's in Grand Forks. Although the frontier had barely passed, the elite built Victorian homes with tile fireplaces and parquet floors and set them in deep lawns. They filled them with Haviland china, silver, cut glass and crystal, flowered carpets, pianos, and velvet draperies. Men dressed their wives in gowns and jewels from Chicago and New York and led a gay social life—balls, dinners, theatricals, imported orchestras, races with

blooded trotters, and formal calling to leave engraved cards.⁴

Striving for equality of status permeated North Dakota life. There was, of course, nothing unusual about either the feelings of inferiority or the compensations for them. When North Dakotans felt patronized and belittled, weak and inferior, they were feeling what all minority groups have always felt. But universality made such feelings no less real and significant in the history of North Dakota. They were solidly based upon North Dakota's status as a rural, sparsely settled, semiarid plains and prairie state, a colonial hinterland exploited by and dependent upon outside centers of trade, manufacturing, and culture. "We are so heartily disgusted with our dependent condition, with being snubbed at every turn in life," wrote the *Yankton Press* and *Dakotaian* in 1877. And in 1882 the *Grand Forks Herald* commented on a rebel leader in Egypt: "Arabi Pasha feels like a Dakota patriot."

TRAITS FOR A NEW COUNTRY

Conditions in early North Dakota strengthened the traits needed for its development—courage, optimism, warmhearted neighborliness, energy, individualism and self-reliance, democratic ways, and often loyalty and a sort of agrarian radicalism. These were natural qualities for a rural society in a new country.

Courage, the great primitive frontier virtue, was an old story with North Dakotans. The Indians had made a religion of courage; the Mandans diligently cultivated it by the self-tortures of the Okipa, and the Sioux did the same thing with the Sun Dance. No fur trader could have survived without it. The settlers who gave up the familiar surroundings of their old homes to move to the Dakota frontier had to have courage. And life on the prairie, with its isolation and loneliness, was not for cowards.

Even optimism was a kind of courage; only optimists moved to the frontier, for there men lived mainly by faith in the future. In 1883, James Bryce, the British statesman, attended the laying of the cornerstone of the capitol at Bismarck. Describing the event in *The American Commonwealth* (1888), he commented that "the confidence of these Westerners is superb" and continued:

It is the same everywhere from the Mississippi to the Pacific. Men seem to live in the future rather than in the present: not that they fail to work while it is called to-day, but they see the country not merely as it is, but as it will be, twenty, fifty, a hundred years hence.

After revisiting Velva in 1955, Eric Sevareid wrote:

⁴Vera Kelsey, [*Red River Runs North!*](#) (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 262-265.

It was a trial of the human spirit just to live there, and a triumph of faith and fortitude for those who stayed on through the terrible blasting of the summer winds, the merciless suns, through the frozen darkness of the winters when the deathly mourn of the coyote seemed at times the only signal of life.

Gertrude Anderson, one of his older friends, said of the early days in Velva: "It was so awful here, then—think of it, from Berlin I came as a bride, to *here!*" Yet it was wonderful, Mrs. Anderson remembered, because of the warmhearted folk in Velva.

The very sparsity of the population made for a neighborly, helpful people given to hospitality. Certainly it placed a value upon the individual; where there were so few, each person counted, each was needed. All of this had a beneficial effect upon the North Dakota character. It helped to define the accepted system of values, made a more decent and humane society, made life more satisfying. If the prairie were lonely, it was better than the loneliness of the great cities, where many people were, or seemed to be, faceless, valueless, unwanted, and unneeded.

North Dakota's cool, dry climate seemed to infuse people with energy and ambition. Though often maligned, it undoubtedly produced the hustle which marked the typical North Dakotan. He was willing to work hard, and he took pride in being able to withstand the rigors of the cold winters.

Although farming encouraged individualism and conservatism in North Dakota, the feelings of being exploited by the grain trade, the railroads, and the banks stimulated cooperation and an agrarian radicalism. Concentration on wheat, the universal crop, gave all North Dakotans a common interest and a common set of enemies in the Twin Cities. So wheat unified a state made up of diverse elements and strengthened radicalism. The strong farmers' cooperatives demonstrated the point.

Not all North Dakotans, of course, were agrarian radicals, nor were they all courageous, energetic, neighborly, self-reliant individualists. Yet many were just such persons, and while times and conditions changed, the North Dakota character seemed to remain much the same. Especially did courage persist. Through the years the leaders of the state were marked by it—from James J. Hill and Pierre Bottineau to Usher L. Burdick and William Langer. Admiring courage, North Dakotans cherished and often celebrated the epic of pioneer settlement. The story of struggle against frontier hardship became the folklore of the people.

North Dakota's political leaders were famous for their independence. In 1961, for example, Senator Milton R. Young, who often defied his own party, denounced the John Birch Society, although it was strong in North Dakota, with, as he said, "some of the most able and influential people in each community."

Optimism, too, persisted, although there were expressions for the ways in which a man might lose his farm: he might be “hailed out,” “dried out,” “blown out,” or “starved out.” And other traits lived on. In 1940, newspaperman Mart Connolly, a worker for the Greater North Dakota Association with a strong affection for the state, wrote:

I like the democracy of North Dakota, the state without a millionaire and with fewest paupers; where rich and poor find a common meeting ground in the fight for improvements in the home state.... There is something of the broadness of its prairies in the mental makeup of its people. A radical is not so radical nor a conservative so conservative in this rather free-and-easy non-eastern state.⁵

In 1947, Governor Fred G. Aandahl said: “We live in an atmosphere of western cordiality. We have the spirit of wholesome consideration and helpfulness one to another.”

Another aspect of the North Dakota character was noted by the Reverend Dr. Carroll E. Simcox, a native of Lisbon who grew up at Park River and became an Episcopal priest and the author of many books. He told the graduating class at the University of North Dakota in 1961 what North Dakota life did to North Dakotans:

The children of these prairies do not grow up expecting that all the bonbons of this world are going to be fed them with a runcible spoon by pampering destiny. Here you sweat by summer and shiver by winter and work and pay for everything you get, so that by the time you are an adult you are spiritually prepared for more hard work... North Dakota life has been meant to make of you a tough fighter, a hard worker.⁶

LOYALTY AND THE HUMANE VALUES

The harsh realities of North Dakota life, the sense of exploitation and minority status, and the unifying influence of the concentration on wheat all gave many North Dakotans a feeling of community, a feeling of identification with the state. Moreover, because they were building a new society, they developed a strong loyalty to it, a strong state patriotism when the state was still very young.

One aspect of loyalty was praise for the land. It began in 1800 when Alexander Henry noted that the Red River Valley Was “as pleasant a country as there is in America.” In the 1880’s, Mary Dodge Woodward praised Cass County, “covered with No. 1 hard wheat and the wayside all abloom with goldenrod and asters,” and the Marquis de Mores liked the Badlands because

⁵*North Dakotan*, XV, 10 (October 1940), 7.

⁶ From a tape recording made by Professor Robert P. Wilkins.

there was, he said, “room to turn around.” Young Theodore Roosevelt, glorying in ranch life on the Little Missouri, wrote to his sister: “The country is growing on me more and more; it has a curious fantastic beauty of its own.”⁷ In the 1940’s, Professor John M. Gillette wrote: “The short spring and fall and the three months of summer are a delight. Most of the days are blessed by sunshine.... The atmosphere is radiant and invigorating, seeming to consist of pure ozone.” In 1958, Don L. Short, rancher and congressman from Medora, called North Dakota “a state with more future than past and one that holds tremendous opportunity for its people if they use it right.”

The state abounded with loyal, humane, warmhearted, outgoing people. A typical example was the Reverend Eldred D. Murdoch, the tall, slender, redheaded chaplain of the Episcopal student center at the University of North Dakota. After growing up at Wimbledon, he served as school superintendent for a score of years at Lidgerwood and other towns. Then, turning to a new calling, he read for holy orders and entered the ministry. His honesty and candor, his ready smile, his enthusiasm and zest for life, his sympathetic insight into the problems of mixed-up young people, and his willingness to spend his time and energies in helping them in their troubles won him a host of young friends before his death in 1962.

Although they were the leaven of society, the Eldred Murdochs were not, of course, well known beyond their own communities, but one North Dakotan was familiar to millions of Americans. While he was individual, not a type, Lawrence Welk, the orchestra leader, gave all Americans an image of the North Dakota character. Of Alsatian stock, he grew up on a farm near Strasburg, North Dakota, learned the accordion from his father, and in the 1920’s began to play at churches, country dances, and then on the radio station at Yankton. After the Second World War, he and his orchestra, playing his famous “Champagne Music,” attained success with long engagements at hotels, many recordings, and a weekly television show. The honest, friendly, and unsophisticated Welk and his wholesome show gave millions of viewers some understanding of North Dakotans. During his rise he had met ridicule and contempt, and so courage and energy played a part in his success. His loyalty to North Dakota was obvious to those who watched his program.

Many North Dakotans expressed loyalty in other ways. Alumni and friends of the University of North Dakota, for example, gave or pledged some five million dollars to that institution in the dozen years after 1950; such gifts were without parallel in the region. Each summer, North Dakotans living on the Pacific Coast held a series of picnics. In 1962 some fourteen thousand persons attended the North Dakota picnic near Seattle.

⁷Elting E. Morison *et al.* (eds.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (8 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951-1954), I, 74.

The support of welfare and education also revealed loyalty, as well as generosity, community spirit, and devotion to democratic, humane values. In 1915 the legislature abolished capital punishment. In 1957, North Dakota ranked fifth among all the states in the amount it spent on public schools in proportion to its income, eighth in the amount spent on higher education. In 1960, North Dakota stood far above the national average in monthly payments to recipients of old-age assistance, although its per capita personal income was well below the national average.

Other actions, too, revealed something of the people, their energy and values, and the changing circumstances of their lives. Every community had persons with cultural interests who cherished books and music. The Scandinavian countries published and consumed more books in proportion to the population than any other people, and the Scandinavian stock was the largest element in North Dakota. In Nelson County in the early 1920's, for example, the homes of Norwegian families had many books, such as the classics of Ibsen and Bjornson, while Germans owned the Works of Goethe and Schiller. In the 1950's, Orville Bakken, a farmer near Northwood, built up a private library of one thousand volumes, and a neighbor, Olaf Jorde, had a collection of three thousand records, mostly classical music.

Many were interested in preserving recollections of the early days. Mary A. Barnes Williams of Washburn, for example, wrote the stories of *Fifty Pioneer Mothers of McLean County, North Dakota* (1932). In the 1950's, communities everywhere were celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of their founding, putting on elaborate programs and publishing substantial histories. Though small as American cities go, the largest places offered a rich cultural fare: concert series, symphony orchestras, art exhibits, and lectures. Newcomers to Fargo-Moorhead were happy to find, as President John J. Neumaier of Moorhead State College said, "a great variety of cultural opportunities, far greater than may be found in most areas of our population."⁸

If North Dakotans had cultural aspirations, they also liked sports. Many took a great interest in basketball, skating, curling, baseball, swimming, and horseback riding. Hunting, a natural pastime in a sparsely settled country, was popular. Men and women shot deer, antelope, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, ducks, and geese. Boys young and old trapped fur bearers: mink, beaver, muskrat, skunk, jackrabbit, and now and then a coyote, wolf, or red fox. Fishing, an old sport in the state, was stimulated by the construction of Garrison and other dams; the large lakes thus created also increased interest in boating and water sports.

Although they played hard, North Dakotans were, more than most Americans, a sober, family-loving, churchgoing, moral people. During the first

⁸[*Fargo Forum*](#), February 24, 1960.

twenty-five years of statehood, 147 bills dealing with moral issues were introduced in the state legislature—an average of more than 12 per session.⁹ In 1961, North Dakota had the second lowest crime rate among all the states (only New Hampshire was lower). While legal grounds were broad and divorces could be had for the asking, North Dakota had the third-lowest divorce rate in the nation; it was less than half the national average. In reality it had the lowest rate, for the two states below it (New York and New Jersey) had such narrow grounds that their people commonly established a legal residence in another state to obtain a divorce.

VARIETIES OF NORTH DAKOTANS

North Dakotans differed in moral standards, character traits, and ideas and outlook, just as they differed in occupation, residence, education, income, and national origin. For many years more of the foreign-born and their children were farmers, more of the older American stock lived in town.

Among the foreign stock there were differences springing from national origins. The German Russians, for example, coming later than the Scandinavians and Canadians, lived on poorer land and were not as well off as other groups. Profoundly influenced by their years in Russia, where they were cut off from stimulating contacts, they considered themselves a downtrodden class, had larger families than the Scandinavians, did not believe so much in schooling, looked upon their womenfolk as inferior, and were slow to diversify their farms. Even in the 1930's, few German Russian young people were attending high school.

There were always exceptions. Sebastian Schweitzer was one. He had served as a court official in Russia before emigrating and homesteading on the Knife River. In his new home Schweitzer became a community leader, played the church organ for twenty-five years, read day and night, and encouraged his children to go to college. In 1934 his son Adam was the first person of German Russian descent from a school district in eastern Dunn County to attend college. But by the 1940's many young German Russians were going to college and entering business and the professions.

Other differences were related to geography. Just as rainfall, topography, the size of farms, and the sparsity of the population differed from east to west in North Dakota, so did the character of the people. Those of the Red River Valley seemed more reserved, more conservative, more formal; those of the Missouri Plateau seemed more friendly, more liberal, more informal. Western North Dakotans liked to gamble, called their ministers and other dignitaries by their first names, and dressed in western-style clothes. Many of them were a hard

⁹Mariellen M. Neudeck, "[Morality Legislation in Early North Dakota, 1889-1914](#)" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1964), pp. 1, 94-99.

drinking, poker-playing, free-and-easy lot. One outsider thought that they had “a Western friendliness, and a quiet, devil-may-care attitude,” that they seemed leaner and fitter than people in other places. In a way, the Drift Prairie, lying between the Missouri Plateau and the Red River Valley, was a transition zone in human characteristics, just as it was in rainfall, native vegetation, and farming.

All North Dakotans were conscious of the state’s minority position; no one wanted to see it lag behind the other states or below the national average. All wanted standard American values, but they held one of two attitudes: they were either loyal to North Dakota and proud of its achievements or critical of the state and ashamed of its status.

The critics, the disloyal ones, were numerous and of long standing. They complained about the climate, the cold, the long winters, the dust storms, and the uncertain rainfall. They disparaged the achievements of the state and talked about its cultural deficiencies. In short, they accepted as valid outsiders’ low valuation and patronizing attitude. Sometimes, when traveling outside North Dakota, they were reluctant to admit that it was their home. They fell into the habit of comparing the state’s weak points with the strong points of other states. Although no rational person would ever expect a farm state such as North Dakota, with its small population, to have or to do all the things possible for a thickly populated, industrialized state, North Dakotans often slipped into disparaging comparisons which implied just such unreasonable expectations.

Some of the disparagement did have a basis in reality. What society actually does all it might do with its resources? But much of it was the result of ignorance or unreason. For example, such a well-educated person as Dr. Edwin H. Rian, then president of Jamestown College, was reported as saying in 1957 that North Dakota’s chief drawback was its cultural deficiencies and adding: “There isn’t a research library in North Dakota.”¹⁰

Although no library in the state was nearly as large as those of the big cities or the great universities of the nation (the implied but unreasonable expectation in Rian’s statement), much research was in actual fact then being done in libraries at the University of North Dakota, the Agricultural College, and the State Historical Society, and scholars from outside the state were using their special collections. In 1960 only about 150 colleges and universities and about 80 cities in the United States had larger libraries than the University of North Dakota. The scholarly George F. Will believed that those who disparaged the state and the region did so out of ignorance and the mistaken “feeling that the Northern Plains are a barren waste.”

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF NORTH DAKOTANS

¹⁰[*Grand Forks Herald*](#), December 15, 1957.

George F. Will and thousands like him were loyal to North Dakota and proud of its achievements. They believed in the state and felt that the distinctions won by many North Dakotans were proof that criticism of the state was unjustified. Probably the greatest North Dakotan, a sort of adopted son, was Theodore Roosevelt, who once said: "I never would have been President if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota."¹¹

Roosevelt was only one of many, for North Dakotans distinguished themselves in many fields. In athletics, Steve Myhra from Wahpeton won the national professional football championship for the Baltimore Colts with his place kicking in 1958; Cliff Cushman from Grand Forks placed second in the high hurdles in the Olympic Games at Rome in 1960; Roger Maris, a Fargo boy playing with the New York Yankees, broke Babe Ruth's home-run record in 1961; and the University of North Dakota hockey team won the intercollegiate championship in 1963. In 1965 the North Dakota State University football team ranked first in the nation among small-college teams. The Tescher brothers (Jim and Tom), Alvin Nelson, and Dean Armstrong—all cowboys from Sentinel Butte—won top honors on the national rodeo circuit.

In business, Harold L. Schafer from Stanton and Bismarck built up a multi-million-dollar glass-wax enterprise, winning the Horatio Alger Award in 1953 for his storybook rise. John M. Hancock from Emerado became president of Jewel Tea, a partner of the Wall Street firm of Lehman Brothers, and a director of some twenty large corporations.

In exploration, Vilhjálmur Stefansson from Mountain sought the secrets of the Arctic; Carl Ben Eielson from Hatton won fame as an Arctic flier. In engineering, Maxwell Upson from Cummings developed prestressed concrete pile and built up an international construction company; Thomas C. Barger from Linton played a part in the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia and became president of the giant Arabian-American Oil Company. In journalism, Edward K. Thompson from St. Thomas became the editor of *Life* magazine; Eric Sevareid from Velva reached the top as a radio and television commentator.

In music, Paul Yoder from Grand Forks won fame as a band arranger and composer; Leigh Gerdine of Sheyenne went to Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar in 1938 and later became chairman of the music department at Washington University, St. Louis. In education, Elmer Ellis from Towner became president of the University of Missouri. Frederick L. Hovde starred on the Devils Lake High School football team; as a member of the University of Minnesota varsity, he led the Western Conference in scoring in 1928. Hovde went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar from North Dakota and later became president of Purdue University. In government service, Howard R. Huston

¹¹[*Dakota Territorial Centennial*](#), a supplement to North Dakota daily newspapers, February 28, 1961, p. 17.

became chief of internal service with the League of Nations (and later vice-president of American Cyanamid); David E. Bell became director of the United States Bureau of the Budget and a lecturer on economics at Harvard. Bell was born in Jamestown; Huston's parents homesteaded Northwest of Granville, and he taught school at Surrey before graduating from the University of North Dakota in 1917. In religion, Bishop Aloisius J. Muench of Fargo became a Papal Nuncio and a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic church.

In medicine, Dr. John S. Lundy from Inkster became head of anesthesiology at the Mayo Clinic; Dr. Cushman D. Haagensen from Hillsboro became a famous cancer specialist at Columbia University. In show business, Dorothy Stickney from Dickinson played the mother in the Broadway hit *Life with Father*; Angie Dickinson from Kulm became a popular show girl and actress. Peggy Lee from Wimbledon and Jamestown found fame as a singer with Benny Goodman's band, on Capitol Records, and on radio and television.

In literature, Maxwell Anderson from Jamestown wrote prize-winning plays for the New York stage; James W. Foley from Medora and Bismarck wrote poetry published in the *New York Times*, *Century*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. In agriculture, Tom Campbell, born in a sod shanty near Grand Forks, acquired a 95,000-acre wheat ranch in Montana and a 500,000-acre cattle ranch in New Mexico; Wilse Richards of Dickinson developed outstanding herds of purebred Angus and Hereford cattle and was elected to the Cowboy Hall of Fame. In law, Judge Ronald N. Davies from Grand Forks made a far-reaching decision at Little Rock, Arkansas, upholding integration of the schools; Edward H. McDermott from Cooperstown became one of the nation's leading experts on tax law.

While merely the names of those who won recognition outside the state would fill pages, those who provided leadership to communities within the state played a more important role in North Dakota history. Many communities had outstanding leaders. One example was the Albert J. Christophers of Pembina. While Mrs. Christopher became an authority on the history of the region, her husband served as mayor for thirty-two years and in the state legislature for ten. As mayor, Christopher, a tall, silver-haired man with a disarming smile, secured a water system, a sewage lagoon, a new city hall, hard-surfaced streets, and a historical museum. He won Pembina a Community Betterment Award in 1962.

In 1959 the North Dakota Economic Development Commission began to give awards in a Community Development Contest. Stimulated by the competition, with its recognition and cash prizes, civic clubs undertook to beautify their towns, to improve recreation with parks, swimming pools, playground equipment, and museums, and to develop industrial opportunities and tourism. Forty-four communities entered the first year's contest, and in the

first three annual contests, first prizes in the various population divisions went to Minot, Rugby, Parshall, Carrington, Larimore, Gackle, Wahpeton, Pembina, and Manvel. In addition, a grand prize was given to the outstanding community in North Dakota. Parshall, led by Gary Lerberg, won it in 1959; Gackle, led by Mrs. E. K. Remboldt, won in 1960; Manvel, led by Odin C. Hoverson and Mrs. Duane Olsen, won in 1962 (there were no awards in 1961). Manvel, population 313, also won fourth place and two thousand dollars in a national community-improvement contest sponsored by the American Federation of Women's Clubs.

Each year, a community leader received the Governor's Award as the outstanding citizen of North Dakota. In 1959 the award went to William S. Davidson, Jr., of Williston, in 1960 to Mrs. E. K. Remboldt of Gackle, and in 1962 to Albert J. Christopher of Pembina. Such recognition demonstrated that many communities had a progressive spirit and able, civic-minded leadership.

Yet for all their abilities and achievements, North Dakotans often met a patronizing attitude. Thus when big, ruddy John Simonson of Grand Forks set a national automobile speed record (208 miles per hour) at Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah, in 1962, he said: "It really shakes 'em up to have a North Dakotan come down there and do that." Although a score of young North Dakotans went to Oxford on Rhodes scholarships and hundreds were graduate students at universities all over the nation, they often found an expectation that they could not do the work because of their origin. But they also found themselves winning a standing at or near the top.

Not all outsiders patronized North Dakotans. The English actor Sir Cedric Hardwicke toured the United States with Charles Laughton, Agnes Moorehead, and Charles Boyer, reading George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*. He recalled the experience in his "irreverent memoirs," *A Victorian in Orbit* (1961):

I discovered that it was hard to discern where we were. All the towns merged into an homogenized blur of Main Street, stoplight at the crossroads, drug-store on one corner, movie house down the block. An exception must be Grand Forks, North Dakota, which gave us the liveliest and most sensitive audience including the two seasons we subsequently did on Broadway.

In 1933, North Dakota ranked a proud fifteenth among the states on an index of cultural-intellectual development prepared by Frederick Osborn of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Osborn used seven tests, including mental tests for school children, army intelligence tests, illiteracy percentages, and magazine readers per one hundred of population, to assign each state a single index number. For all its isolation, ruralism, and its position of economic disadvantage as an exploited farm state, North Dakota

ranked ahead, among others, of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Utah, Nebraska, Kansas, South Dakota, and Iowa, as well as all the southern states.¹²

Such abundant evidence of the ability and worth of the North Dakota people eased the irrational and unjustified feelings of inferiority forced upon them by the status of their state as a colonial hinterland. North Dakotans got satisfaction from other sources. Many of them loved the flat, fertile Chernozem soils of the Red River Valley, the sweep of the vast, rolling prairie with its endless expanse of grass and sky, and the awesome, silent grandeur of the scarred Badlands. They looked with pride upon their handiwork: the rippling fields of grain; the herds of cattle; the magnificent skyscraper capitol; the exhibits of the State Historical Society; the campuses of the institutions of higher education, with their libraries, laboratories, classrooms, dormitories, student unions, and playing fields; the many fine public schools and churches; the railroads and highways; the newspapers; the radio and television stations; the clinics and hospitals; the state welfare institutions; the strong cooperatives; and the towns, with their business enterprises, parks, and handsome homes set in flower-bordered lawns. All these represented the attainment of standard American values.

Proud of the present, North Dakotans looked back upon a long record of achievement which had turned an empty, semiarid wilderness into a civilized country with much of the equipment of a modern society. So, on the once-empty prairie, hundreds of thousands of people, endowed with energy, knowledge, and a great variety of skills, lived, and each year, in spite of blizzard and drought, produced much wealth, enough to net annually some one billion dollars of personal income by the late 1950's.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF NORTH DAKOTA LIFE

North Dakota life changed in many ways from the 1920's to the 1950's. There were important shifts in occupation and residence. By the 1950's the majority of those gainfully employed were for the first time making a living in nonagricultural employment. Thirty-five percent lived in urban centers (2,500 or more population) by 1960 and 47 percent in places of over 1,000. More and more farmers were living in town.

Many forces were breaking down the rural isolation and remoteness which had characterized North Dakota life for so long. The telephone helped. Forty-one percent of North Dakota's farms in 1930 had telephones, and the figure was up to 66 percent in 1959. In the 1920's radio and in the 1950's television put North Dakotans, in spite of distance and scattered population, in instant touch with ideas, news, and entertainment from all over the world. In 1930,

¹²[*New York Times*](#), May 13, 1933, p. 15.

when radio was only a decade old, 40 percent of North Dakota farm families owned receiving sets, a percentage nearly double that of the farm families of the nation. Good roads and automobiles also did much to break down isolation.

North Dakotans really took the automobile to their hearts. Like the people of other states in the West, they owned far more automobiles in proportion to the population than did Americans generally. North Dakotans drove fast, and distance came to mean little to them. Its conquest, creating an enlarged community, made possible a reorganization of social institutions (schools, churches, newspapers, health and library services) to reach more people and so avoid the handicaps imposed by sparsity of population.

With the dispersal of North Dakotans over the nation, most families had relatives in other states and frequently traveled outside North Dakota. If they had prospered, it was not uncommon for the Scandinavian immigrants to visit their Old World homes. By the 1950's many high school and college students, as well as older people, were making European tours; and in 1959 a group of North Dakota leaders visited Russia.

Moreover, people were more at home on the prairie than ever before; the earlier uneasiness had passed away. By 1960 only a few of the foreign-born were still living, and most North Dakotans belonged to families which had been in the state for three generations or more. The people were also steadily becoming more alike as intermarriage mixed the many original stocks. Then, in the postwar years, with prosperity, with hard-surfaced roads and new schools, with rural electrification, with better hospitals and more libraries, with the young going in ever larger numbers to colleges and professional schools, and with all the goods and services which made up the American standard of living, the psychology of North Dakotans underwent a marked change. Memories of the terrible 1930's faded in the minds of the older people, and the young had no recollection of those years. By 1960 nearly half the population had been born since 1939. So many North Dakotans lost the feeling of being exploited, second-class citizens separated from the main stream of American life. With the change came a growing conservatism. The once-radical North Dakota Farmers' Union moderated, and its television voice argued for the identity of interests between the farmer and main street.

THE LESSON OF ADAPTATION

When North Dakotans think about the history of their state, they are thinking about a usable past, for it reveals a steady adjustment to the physical environment. Just as native plant and animal life had adapted to conditions on the Northern Plains and just as Indian tribes from more humid lands to the east had adapted to the same environment, so, too, did the white pioneers and their successors, the North Dakotans of later years, respond to the imperatives of the grassland.

In 1907, biologist Wallace Craig, then a teacher at Valley City Normal School, first pointed out the manifold adaptations of North Dakota plant, animal, and human life to the dry, cold, level plain. He wrote:

But more impressive, to my mind, than all the isolated facts, is the deep-lying sympathy between the plants, the animals, and the men, that must all adapt themselves to the same hard conditions; the consequent similarity of behavior in even the most diverse forms of life; and, finally, the extent to which the most wonderful products of plains civilization have been foreshadowed, and in some cases, I may say, even excelled by the work of the primeval inhabitants.¹³

North Dakotans can look upon their accomplishments with satisfaction. They can feel at home in a world of change and look forward with optimism to a continuation of the still-incomplete work of adapting their society and its institutions to the environment. In the future, as in the past, they will deal with the problems of scanty rainfall and the sparsity of population which it has produced. They will seek to raise and stabilize their income, to diversify their economy, to conquer distance, to counteract in some way the social cost of space, and to adjust school, college, and church to meet their economic, cultural, and spiritual needs. By such adjustment they can, in the future, as they have in the past, continue to attain the ever rising standard American values and at the same time be themselves—moral, courageous, outspoken individuals, lean and fit, friendly, democratic and hospitable, energetic and aggressive. For they live, not in the urban world with its lonely crowd, but on the prairie, where the sparsity of population emphasizes the worth of the individual, where each is needed and each can do his part in the upward struggle of a rural society.

¹³Wallace Craig, "[North Dakota Life: Plant, Animal and Human](#)," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, XL (July 1908), 415.