

native americans

euro-americans

some shared attitudes

toward life

in the prairies

joseph t. manzo

Doubtless, the Indians found it as forbidding a region as did the white man.

W. Eugene Hollon, *The Great American Desert*.¹

While it is true that many of the facts cited will be familiar, we are about to look at them in new ways.

Clark Wissler, *Man and Culture*.²

Native Americans are popularly imagined as enjoying a communion with nature beyond the ability of other peoples. Coffee-table tomes have described this relationship as a “rare harmony” and in terms of the Indian possessing a “reverence for . . . land” and “an intimate familiarity with fire, earth, sky and roundness.”³ At times, scholarly literature has supported this view with descriptions of “higher levels of consciousness,” “mystical unity” and “sacred attachment.”⁴ The visual media have also followed the “formula.” Artists such as Catlin, Eastman and King illustrated the noble savage for us. Movies and television have presented the Indian as “master of the wilderness” and nature’s interpreter.⁵ In addition, a currently popular communication mode, the poster, has provided at least one notable example of the Indians’ “ingrained sense of ecology.”⁶ This pan-Indian view of Native American-environment relations is not an accurate one and only acts to reinforce already existing barriers to Indian-Euro-American understanding and appreciation.⁷ Data indicate that Native Americans with a heritage of woodland living and agricultural tradition not only were taken somewhat aback by the scale of

prairie environments they encountered, but also shared similar attitudes with Euro-Americans toward timber, health, climate and soil in the prairies. The purpose of this paper is to present these common sentiments. Such knowledge shatters the stereotype of Indian-Environmental kinship and provides new perspective on Indian-Euro-American relations based on environmental conditioning.

Primary source data were provided by two main sources within Record Group #75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. These sub-record groups were M-234, letters received at the Indian agencies 1824-1881 and T-494, documents relating to negotiation of ratified and unratified treaties with various Indian tribes 1801-1869. Support for federal records was provided by the Clark Papers, John G. Pratt Papers, Jotham Meeker Papers, and Issac McCoy Papers. When quoting from these sources no punctuation was added, no spelling corrected, and no verb tenses changed unless otherwise noted in the text. Where identification is possible, distinction is made regarding the level of assimilation of the various Indian groups involved.

The approach taken in this study was to gather as many Native American references toward the prairie environment as possible. The result was input by a good proportion but not all Native Americans who were to relocate. In addition, Native American attitudes were supplemented by remarks about Indian attitudes made by employees of the Indian service. As the mission of those employed by the Indian service at the time was to move Indians west, their reports of Indian dissatisfaction would not have resulted in personal gain or notoriety as reported.⁸ Taken together, Indian and Anglo references served as a base from which comparisons with already well documented Euro-American attitudes could be made. It should be noted that some of the quotes presented in this paper have been filtered through interpreters and recording secretaries. As such, some relevant material may never have been properly documented. However, there appear to be only sporadic complaints by Euro-Americans of interpreters and inaccurate reporting was noted in several cases by Native Americans. Overall, the data provide a perspective on the removal process from the Native American point of view.⁹

people and place

The Anglo-Americans of this study were primarily emigrants and first generation Americans of northern European descent.¹⁰ Among the traits they held in common was a heritage rooted in cultures which had developed in a woodland setting.¹¹ Of those new to the United States, a majority came from the British Isles and the European sub-continent while a lesser number came from the Scandinavian countries.¹² The native born were from New England, the mid-Atlantic and the Kentucky-Tennessee region.¹³ They traveled by water, and, where feasible, overland across the Appalachian mountains. By the late 1820's, these settlers, more numerous than ever before, were demanding and gaining access to Native American

lands in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Illinois.¹⁴ Examples of this demand can be seen in petitions from groups in Ohio and Michigan. From Ohio comes a petition from the citizens of Seneca County which “respectfully showth that it is greatly desired by the people of said county that the Indian’s title to . . . 40,000 acres of land be extinguished . . . and that the band be removed west of the Mississippi River.”¹⁵ Government Commissioner Lewis Cass received a petition from settlers in Michigan asking not merely to reduce Indian lands, but, “if practicable, to treat with the Indian for all their lands east of the Mississippi.”¹⁶ Possessing an insatiable appetite for land, Euro-Americans settled the better wooded areas and woodland-prairie fringe areas first. Later settlers were faced with large prairies which housed little timber.

The Native Americans considered in this study were among those semi-sedentary groups residing in the eastern woodland culture area. (See chart below). Although they displayed many common characteristics (hence the classification “woodland culture”), they were not a totally uniform people. Differences existed with regard to language background, length of residence in their respective areas and level of assimilation.¹⁷

Indian Groups and Their Respective Populations

Northeast United States

Tuscarora	250
Seneca	2,900
Onondaga	450
Oneida	1,100
Stockbridge	300
Brothertown	360
Cayuga	100

Old Northeast

Miami	1,550
Wyandot	600
Sac/Fox	6,600
Shawnee	2,000
Piankashaw, Wea, Peoria	478
Kickapoo	2,200
Winnebago	5,800
Pottawatomi	6,500
Chippewa	15,000
Ottawa	4,000

Southeast United States

Cherokee	15,000
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Eastern Plains

Kanza	1,200
Pawnee	1,200
Omaha	1,900
Osage	5,000

Source: *Government Census, 1829.*

After Manzo, *Kansas History: Journal of the Central Plains.*

These groups, in large measure because of the demand for their lands, were bound by law to negotiate for new homes in the western prairies of the

United States. They were to occupy what is today northern Oklahoma, the state of Kansas and northwest Missouri.¹⁸ Although the Native Americans of this study were familiar with grassland environments, they would not be simply exchanging one prairie land for another. These Native Americans were at the very least ecotone dwellers. Their survival strategy, which included exploitation of prairie lands, was also a woodland one. Thus it is only when confronted with the possibility of moving to an area where grass made up approximately 97% of the vegetative cover that Native Americans began finding prairie dwelling problematic.¹⁹ Of course, comparisons of Indian-Euro-American attitudes toward prairie environments cannot be drawn in a wholesale manner. Neither all of the Indians nor Euro-Americans involved in this study expressed altogether similar documentable attitudes, and discrepancies in attitudes toward prairie residence probably did exist. Attitudes also likely differed among members of each respective group. For example, the Judeo-Christian approach by Anglos and converted Indians to the environment was different in intent than the more animistic approach of the culturally conservative Indian. Thus the more exploitive nature of the Christian Anglo and Indian would differ upon settlement in the prairies. Differences in the form of economic endeavor and technology were factors that also led the two groups to have variant concerns over somewhat different elements of the environment. Native Americans, for example, expressed concern over the lack of game, the absence of sugar trees, social conditions and water supply.²⁰ Euro-Americans were concerned with breaking the prairie sod, the ability of prairies to support livestock, proximity to navigable waterways, the potential agricultural markets.²¹ Yet despite these differences, four parallels in attitudes are readily discernible. These parallels are a negative assessment of the available timber, a perceived unhealthiness of the prairies, a judgment that winters were severe and a positive evaluation of soil fertility. The basis for these similar attitudes are the links established between the groups' cultural traditions and the woodland setting where they previously resided. The fact that Indian and non-Indian peoples would hold similar environmental attitudes based on their interaction with a common past environment should not be construed as deterministic. Rather, it is a case of environmental probabilism, groups reacting to a new environment on the basis of where their cultures developed.²²

timber

Pioneer settlers east of the Appalachians were familiar with prairie. Sometimes called oak openings, savannas, plains or barrens, these small eastern prairies did not present a particular problem to settlement in the East. The pioneer farmer could avoid these small prairies altogether or settle on the woodland grassland fringe. In the trans-Appalachian mid-west, however, the prairies were larger, resulting in a lack of timber for housing, fencing, fuel and tool making. To the easterner, wood was more than just an element of his lifestyle; it was part of the ecology of

agricultural life itself. Suggestions of ditching in place of fencing, sod for housing and coal for fuel were initially not well received.²³ “20 miles to wood and 10 miles to hell” seems an apt description of the Euro-American attitude toward the lack of timber.²⁴

Before eastern Indians could be removed to western lands, it was necessary for the government to gain title to these lands. Councils were held with historically indigenous Indians residing on the eastern fringe of the prairie-plains to reduce their holdings. During these negotiations, and in subsequent conversations, these prairie-plains groups definitely preferred some areas over others for their new reservation. A primary consideration was timber. Indian agent Richard Cummins, for example, reports on the feelings of one group as it accompanied him on an exploring party across Kansas territory:

The Kansas Indians that were with me had been in the habit of traveling through and hunting in the country almost every year of their lives assured me that there were no timber west of the Grand point except cotton wood and some very short scattering of other kinds of trees and that they could not live on the Kansas River anywhere west of the Grand point.²⁵

The Pawnee made the point more succinctly: “At times . . . Pawnee are poor [we] have not wood [we] travel through the prairie and find nothing there.”²⁶

In the lands set aside for Native Americans from the Old Northwest and northeast United States, prairie was also the rule, although woodlands occurred along river courses and breaks in slope. During extended periods of above average wetness, the tall grasses associated with the eastern reservation lands extended their ranges west, while during dry periods the hardier short grasses of the West extended their ranges east.²⁷ These fluctuations, however, had little effect on Native American attitudes. Encouraged to become farmers, their short-lived, government-guided exploring tours left them concerned with only the overall grass-to-wood ratio.

Representative of those Native American groups concerned with the lack of timber are the united band of Pottawatomi-Ottawa and Chippewa and the Wyandot Indians. A spokesman for the united band of Pottawatomi-Ottawa and Chippewa group, for example, reported to government agents, “We understand that you wished us to become cultivators of the soil. Some of our men desire to do so there is little encouragement for them become farmers in a country where there is so little timber.”²⁸ The Wyandot Indians, a highly assimilated group, concurred, “There is not good timber sufficient for the purpose of a people that wish to pursue agriculture.”²⁹

This attitude toward prairie-woodland distribution is echoed by the culturally progressive North Carolina Cherokee. Government negotiator Joseph Deaderiche reported that the Cherokee were “violently opposed to . . . emigration. This is occasioned principally by the bad opinion they

entertain of Arkansas Viz that it was mere prairie void of wood and water.”³⁰ Thus, when both Native Americans and Euro-Americans were confronted with little option but to settle a prairie area, their negative responses to the availability of wood were similar.

the unhealthiness of the prairies

The unhealthiness of the prairie areas was also an objection of Euro-Americans. Carl Sauer and Douglas McManis document these objections. Sauer tells us “The prairie states . . . once were reputed very unhealthful,” while McManis has written that perceived unhealthiness of the Illinois prairie was a “widespread objection to . . . settlement.”³¹ These statements made by Euro-Americans exactly parallel the Indian view. The Tuscarora-Seneca and Onondaga, another highly assimilated group, for example, stated that the area set aside for them was “a poor barren, unhealthy country where many families have lost their children in a course of a few years.”³² A spokesman for a culturally conservative Miami faction reported to agents of the federal government that they “were sorry to put off their removal so long . . . [but] his people were afraid to start so soon as to reach their new home in the hottest and most unhealthy season of the year.”³³ Again, the North Carolina Cherokee concurred, calling the prairie “a perfect graveyard.”³⁴

Poorly drained prairies with stagnant water were felt to be contributors to the occurrence of malaria, typhoid, “and similar fevers” that Euro-Americans lumped together as “fever and Ague.”³⁵ There was also widespread feeling that such illness was caused by gases rising from newly plowed prairie.³⁶ Native Americans were as fearful of contracting fever as non-Indians. While they seemed to attribute a part of this unhealthiness to poorly drained areas, they also saw a close link between health and climate as can be seen in the aforementioned statement by the Miami. A further clue to the relationship between climate and health can be seen in the statement by Billy Caldwell, the half-Irish, half-Indian Chief of the united band of Pottawatomi-Ottawa and Chippewa. Caldwell, speaking for his culturally conservative group, wrote in a letter to T. Hartley Crawford, superintendent of Indian Affairs, that the area is “unhealthy for people from a cold climate.”³⁷

severe winters

Oceans, seas and lakes can influence the regional climate. This influence is seen in the lower temperature ranges of coastal areas. In the case of the prairies, this means that winter temperatures in the interior of the United States will generally be lower than on the coasts. This phenomenon, referred to as continentality, is underscored on the prairies where winter winds blowing unchecked by stands of trees or forest significantly affect the wind chill index. According to Harlan Barrows, these climatic characteristics acted as a deterrent to Euro-American

settlement on the eastern prairies.³⁸ Carl Sauer has written “. . . tales of the bitter western winters circulated throughout the country for years.”³⁹

Representing the Indian view are the words of an unidentified spokesman for the culturally conservative Kickapoo who voiced apprehension about moving to the Indian country. He states, “I am opposed to it I am afraid that my women and children will freeze in the winter there.”⁴⁰ The Wyandot Indians agreed, writing, “From all the information we could obtain with regard to the climate, we are satisfied that it is colder than it is in our part of the state of Ohio.”⁴¹ Of course the severity of prairie winters was not reduced in the least by the amount of wood available for fuel.

soil

The soils of the interior grasslands, from west central Indiana through central Kansas, can generally be described as fertile. Termed mollisols, their characteristics include a dark brown to black color and a high organic content. These characteristics were not lost on prairie settlers and almost all scholars agree that prairie soils were very fertile. In their estimation, prairie areas were not generally rejected out of hand because they were thought to be barren, although initially there seems to have been some question of whether a soil that did not produce trees could be fertile. Such reasoning, however, seems to have been abandoned for a more positive attitude by the time settlement had reached the trans-Appalachian midwest. Bernard Peters notes this change in attitude on the part of Euro-American settlers moving from upstate New York to Michigan, and Allan Bogue has written, “If American pioneers had once believed that the prairies were infertile because trees did not grow there, they were rejecting this misconception by the 1820’s.”⁴² Terry Jordan upholds this view, writing, “The prejudice (toward the prairie) that did exist . . . did not have its basis in a belief of prairie infertility.”⁴³ The soils found throughout the aforementioned region, it should be noted, were not uniformly fertile. There existed, for example, poorly drained soils and soils that were too well drained. Available data indicate that Euro-Americans recognized these areas as well.

Native Americans were also good judges of soil quality. By way of illustration, the Miami Indians, with a notable tradition of agriculture, recognized an area of poorly drained soil along the Osage River in southeastern Kansas, and referred to it as “poor and unfriendly.”⁴⁴ The Shawnee and Wyandot, however, found the soil in their prospective areas to be of good agricultural quality. The appraisal by the Wyandot Indians demonstrates their knowledge of soil fertility. In their report of 1831 they stated, “With regard to the quality of the soil, no objection can be urged. It is generally a dark, rich loam, varying in depth by either hilly or bottom land, it is rich and productive.”⁴⁵ The Shawnee, a bit more succinctly, stated, “On the Kansas River the soil is good.”⁴⁶

conclusion

In the case of Native Americans and Euro-Americans confronted with a primarily prairie residence, environmental background resulted in several parallel attitudes. These attitudes were a negative assessment of timber, concern with the unhealthiness of the prairie, concern with harsh winter and a general agreement that the soil of the area was good. Such knowledge places the already well documented Euro-American experience on the prairie in larger perspective. Thus we find people reacting to a new environment based on the links developed between their cultures and environments of previous residence. Moreover, it points out that accentuation of cultural distinction is only one approach to inter-group understanding and appreciation. This same knowledge also brings the Indian per se into sharper focus. The pan-Indian appreciation of nature implied in the myth of "mystical unity" no longer holds. This awareness of similar attitudes breaks down the artificial barriers created when, as George Grinnell has written, "we are apt to forget these people are human."⁴⁷ This knowledge also makes painfully clear the harshness of the Indian removal policy itself. Euro-Americans, unhappy with the idea of prairie residence, were free to settle the prairies if they so desired, or at least to move on if their undertaking proved a failure. For the majority of emigrant Indians involved in removal no such option was available as they were virtually locked to the place by existing law.

Concord College

notes

1. Eugene W. Hollon, *The Great American Desert* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961).
2. Clark Wissler, *Indians of the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966). The Wissler quote also appears in W. P. Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York, 1931).
3. *America's Fascinating Indian Heritage* (New York, 1978), 4; *The Whole Earth Catalog* (New York, 1968-71); Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., ed., *The American Heritage Book of Indians* (American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1961).
4. Wissler, *Indians of the United States*, 305; Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1970), 4; Josephy, *The Indian Heritage of America*, 7.
5. Robert F. Berkoff, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1979), 98.
6. *Ibid.*, 138L.
7. Robert K. Thomas, "Pan Indianism," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 2 (1965), 74-78; Stuart Levine, "The Indian as American," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 2 (1965), 2-23; Oliver LaFarge, "Myths that Hide the American Indian," *Historical Viewpoints*, John Garraty, ed. (New York, 1969), 12-26.
8. These record groups have provided data for a number of historical works including those of Grant Foreman, A. H. Abel, A. M. Gibson and James A. Clifton. For further evaluation of this data source see Mary Sue and Ernest L. Schusky, "A Center of Primary Sources for Plains Indians," *Plains Anthropologist* 15 (May, 1970), 104-109.
9. Data indicate that emigrant Indian groups were provided with both negative and positive information concerning the western territory from such varied sources as government officials, traders, missionaries, other Indians, personal experience and a host of individuals who defy categorization. Indian views on removal reflect environmental variables, history and their contemporary situation. Relocation decisions indicate a heavy reliance on what Native Americans thought best for themselves. Joseph T. Manzo, "Indian and Anglo Information Sources Available to Indians Prior to Their Removal: Their Accuracy and Influence on Indian Attitudes Toward Removal," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Fall, 1982. For examples of inaccurate reporting see: Record Group M-234, "Correspondence dated October 1837" on microfilm roll 597 (National Archives); Record Group M-234, "Correspondence dated September 2, 1835" on microfilm roll 601 (National Archives); Record Group M-234, "Removal Report dated 1846,"

microfilm roll 597 (National Archives); Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1932), 266.

10. Allan Bogue, "Farming the Prairie Peninsula, 1830-1980," *Journal of Economic History*, 23 (1963), 4.

11. Other traits include a heritage of Christianity, a language background rooted in the Indo-European language family and membership in the Caucasoid geographical race. Terry G. Jordan, *The European Cultural Area* (New York, 1973).

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. A. H. Abel, *The History of Events Resulting in Indian Consolidation West of the Mississippi River* (AMS Edition, 1972); F. Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962).

15. Record Group M-234, "Petition dated September 26, 1932" on microfilm roll 601 (National Archives).

16. Record Group M-234, "Correspondence dated August 7, 1828" on microfilm roll 420 (National Archives).

17. R. F. Spencer, J. D. Jennings et al., *The Native Americans* (New York, 1977); H. Driver, *Indians of North America*, (Chicago, 1961); F. W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico I & II*, (New York, 1959); C. Wissler, *Indians of the United States*; W. H. Oswalt, *This Land Was Theirs* (New York, 1978); Milton Gordon, "The Nature of Assimilation," *Assimilation in American Life* (New York, 1964); Jerry E. Clark, *The Shawnee* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1976); C. A. Weslager, *The Delaware Indians* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1972); A. M. Gibson, *The Kickapoos* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1963); James A. Clifton, *The Prairie People* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1977); Bert Anson, *The Miami Indian* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1970).

18. In dealing with emigrant Indians and prairie attitudes, I have, by definition, been forced to ignore most southeastern groups. Their western lands included the Ouchita Highlands, an environment different than the prairies.

19. R. Welsch, "Shelters on the Plains," *Natural History*, 86 (1977), 50.

20. For accounts of emigrant Indian attitudes see J. T. Manzo, "Some Emigrant Indian Objections to Kansas Residence," *Kansas History: Journal of the Central Plains*, Winter (1981); E. Neumeyer, "Michigan Indians Battle Against Removal," *Michigan History*, 55 (1971), 275-289.

21. Euro-American studies include the following: Bogue, "Farming the Prairie Peninsula," 3-29; Ralph H. Brown, *Historical Geography of the United States* (New York, 1948); Carl O. Sauer, "Conditions of Pioneer Life in the Upper Illinois Valley, in *Land and Life*, John Leighly, ed. (Berkeley, 1969), 11-23; Terry Jordan, "Between the Forest and the Prairie, *Agricultural History*, 38 (1964), 205-217; Bernard Peters, "Changing Ideas About the Use of Vegetation as an Indicator of Soil Quality: Examples of New York and Michigan," *Journal of Geography*, 72 (1973), 18-31; Douglas McManis, *The Initial Evaluation and Utilization of the Illinois Prairies 1815-1840* (Chicago, 1964).

22. Harold and Margaret Sprout, "Environmental Factors in the Study of International Politics," *Conflict Resolution*, 1 (1957); Betty J. Meggers, "Environmental Limitation on the Development of Culture," *American Anthropologist*, 56 (1954).

23. McManis, *The Initial Evaluation and Utilization of the Illinois Prairies 1815-1840*, 37.

24. Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962).

25. Record Group M-234, "Report dated July 17, 1847" on microfilm roll 302 (National Archives).

26. Record Group T-494, "Correspondence dated September 20, 1837" on microfilm roll 2 (National Archives).

27. A. W. Kuchler, "The Oscillation of the Mixed Prairie," *Erkunde*, 2 (June, 1972), 120-128.

28. Manzo, "Emigrant Indian Objections to Kansas Residence."

29. J. Orin Oliphant, ed., "The Report of the Wyandot Exploring Delegation 1831," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XIV (1947), 242-262.

30. Record Group M-234, "Speech to the Georgia, North Carolina and Alabama delegation from General Nat Smith, Superintendent of Removal, dated February 2, 1838" on microfilm roll 115 (National Archives). The reference to Arkansas refers to what is today northern Oklahoma.

31. Sauer, "Pioneer Life in the Upper Illinois Valley," 19; D. McManis, *The Initial Evaluation and Utilization of the Illinois Prairie 1815-1840*.

32. Manzo, "Emigrant Indian Objections to Kansas Residence."

33. Record Group M-234, "Report of George Erwin, Contractor, dated 1846" on microfilm roll 418 (National Archives).

34. Record Group M-234, "Speech to the Georgia, North Carolina, and Alabama Delegation from General Nat Smith."

35. McManis, *The Initial Evaluation and Utilization of the Illinois Prairie 1815-1840*, 41.

36. The effect was to decrease as cultivation continued. Sauer, "Pioneer Life in the Upper Illinois Valley."

37. Record Group M-234, "Correspondence dated September 4, 1939" on microfilm roll 215 (National Archives).

38. H. H. Barrows, "Geography of the Middle Illinois Valley," *Bulletin of the Illinois State Geological Survey*, 15 (Urbana, Illinois, 1910).

39. Sauer, "Pioneer Life in the Upper Illinois Valley," 12.
40. Manzo, "Emigrant Indian Objections to Kansas Residence."
41. Oliphant, "The Report of the Wyandot Exploring Delegation, 1831."
42. Bogue, "Farming in the Prairie Peninsula, 1830-1890," 6.
43. Jordan, "Between the Forest and the Prairie," 209.
44. Manzo, "Emigrant Indian Objections to Kansas Residence."
45. Oliphant, "The Report of the Wyandot Exploring Delegation, 1831."
46. Record Group M-234, "Letter to the President of the United States dated June 1829" on microfilm roll 300 (National Archives).
47. George Bird Grinnell, *The Story of the Indian* (New York, 1895), x.