

vernacular regions in kansas

james r. shortridge

Students of American culture are accustomed to seeing the nation divided into regions at many scales. At one level phrases such as New England, the South, and the Middle West are used to define areas of supposed homogeneity, and the regionalization process continues at increasingly finer scales until neighborhoods and similar sized units appear. It is an important, but rarely asked, question whether or not these regional creations of academicians and others bear a resemblance to what one may call vernacular regions, those regions perceived to exist by people actually living in the places under consideration.

Vernacular regionalization is part of a larger issue of place awareness or consciousness usually termed "sense of place." Such awareness has been a traditional concern of humanists and, in recent years, "sense of place" discussions have appeared with increasing frequency in popular publications. The issue has considerable practical importance. Such varied activities as regional planning, business advertising, and political campaigning all could profit from knowledge of how people perceptually organize space. It is ironic that modern America is discovering the importance of place awareness at the time when our increasingly mobile existence makes such a "sense" difficult to achieve. Few people now doubt the advantages, even the necessity, of being in intimate enough contact with a place to establish what Wendell Berry has termed "a continuous harmony" between man and the land.¹ We lack information, however, on the status of our relationship to the land. The study of vernacular regions perhaps can provide insights into this complex issue. The naming of a place and the continued use of that name are indications that its inhabitants are aware of its regional uniqueness. The place has meaning to them, and meaning is a necessary prerequisite for ecological respect.

Humanistic scholars from several fields have stressed the impor-

tance of the experiential perspective for regional studies. More than three decades ago Howard Odum noted that, for a sociologist, "a region is an area of which the inhabitants feel themselves a part."² More recently cultural geographers have echoed his sentiments. Zelinsky, for example, has called "the condition of self-awareness on the part of participants," one of the principal characteristics of a culture area, and Tuan defines places (including regions) as "center[s] of meaning constructed by experience."³

In spite of both the importance of and growing interest in place consciousness, few studies exist. We have cultural regionalizations based on religious, linguistic, political, or other similar data, but these measure self-awareness only indirectly, if at all. Humanistic discussions of place often are highly personal, and, for a given time and location, often severely limited in number. It seems that social scientists have been hesitant to delve into subjective place material while humanists have avoided social science methodology. A modest amount of research on place perception exists at the neighborhood level, including demonstrations of discrepancies between vernacular regions and those created by social scientists.⁴ The situation at larger scales has barely been explored. As a case study, I examine in this study the vernacular regions of Kansas at several levels. First I look at how Kansans perceive their association with two major American regional terms: Middle West and Great Plains. Their employment of directional names as regional labels follows, and then perceptions of more localized regions. Finally, I briefly discuss positive and negative attitudes toward place as indicated by regional labels. General concerns throughout the paper are on the relative intensity of the vernacular regions, the processes involved in their creation and maintenance and the relationship between these regions and those derived from traditional analyses.

Vernacular regions at the scales under consideration here have been measured by others in two principal ways: directly by means of questionnaires, and indirectly through surveys of businesses and other organizations that use regional terms as part of their names.⁵ I employ both approaches here. I patterned parts of the questionnaire and its administration after one developed recently for Texas, in order to provide broader perspective on the results.⁶ University students in introductory geography and history classes at five sites throughout the state were asked four questions about their "home" county.⁷ My goal was to obtain a minimum of five respondents from each county, an objective achieved in ninety-eight of one hundred and five cases (Fig. 1). All but forty-two of the 1246 questionnaires in the final sample were administered in classroom situations; the remainder were presented orally in telephone interviews with students at the University of Kansas selected, with the aid of a geographical directory, in an effort to contact people from under-represented counties.

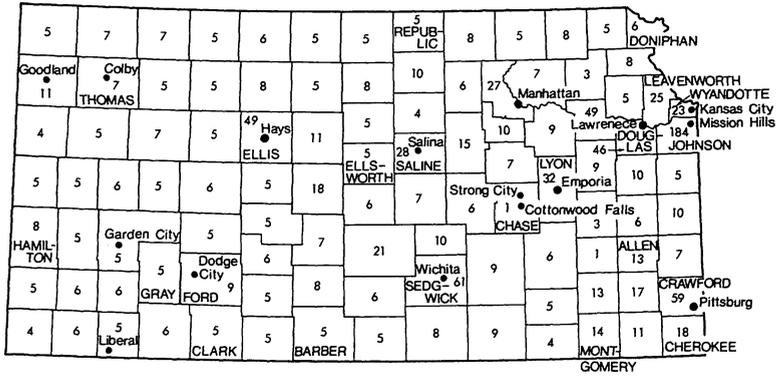


FIGURE 1: Number of persons responding to questionnaire, by "home" county. Large dots denote cities where the questionnaire was administered; other names are cities and counties referred to in the text.

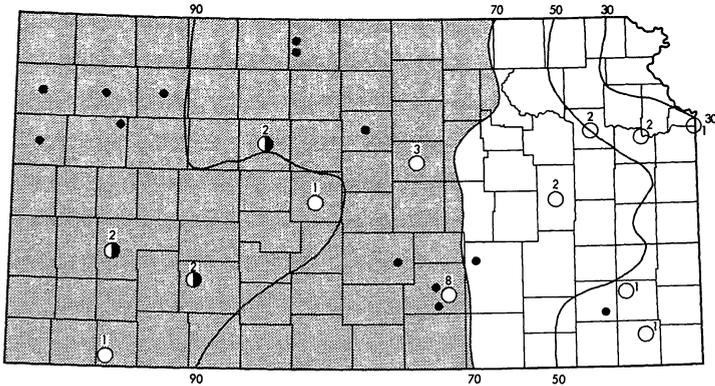


FIGURE 2: The perceptual Great Plains in Kansas. Isolines indicate the percentage of questionnaire respondents who said that their home counties were part of the Great Plains. Areas above 70 percent are lightly shaded. Point symbols, here and on Figures 3-7, indicate where the particular regional name is used as part of a business or service organization name. Small symbols represent individual occurrences in cities smaller than 10,000 people. Large symbols refer to cities larger than 10,000 people. The number above each large symbol is the number of individual occurrences of the particular regional name; the amount of shading inside the symbol indicates the number of occurrences per 10,000 people according to the following scheme: not shaded = less than 1.0, half shaded = 1.0-2.4, completely shaded = 2.5 or more.

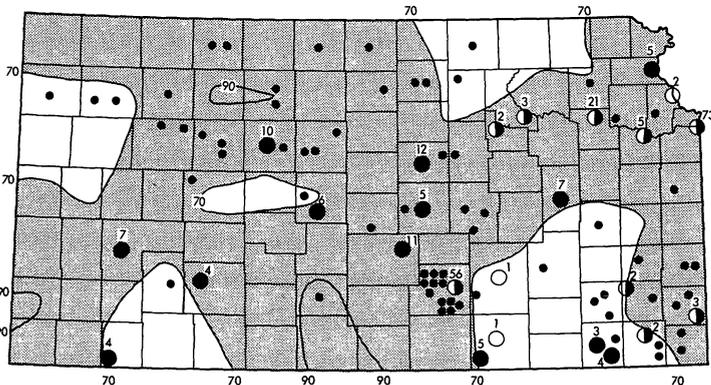
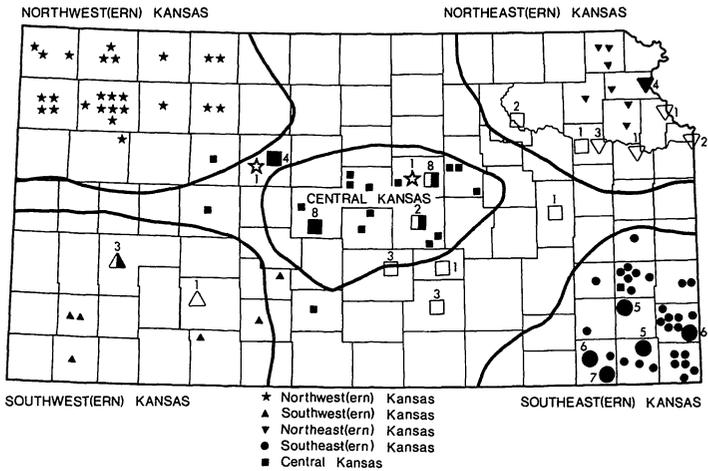


FIGURE 3: The perceptual Middle West in Kansas. Isolines indicate the percentage of questionnaire respondents who said that their home counties were part of the Middle West. Areas above 70 percent are lightly shaded. Point symbols indicate where Middle West (or Midwest) is used as part of a business or service organization name (for details see Figure 2 caption).



FIGURES 4-5: Selected directional terms as perceptual regions. Boundaries are based on questionnaire responses and enclose areas where the labeled terms are dominant. Point symbols indicate where particular terms are used as part of a business or service organization name (for details see Figure 2 caption).

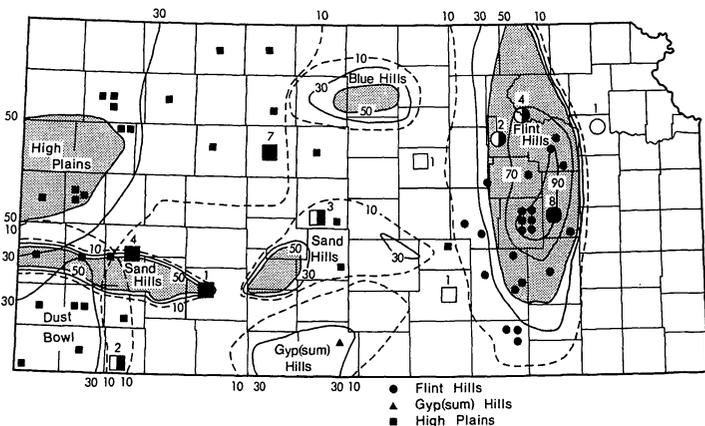
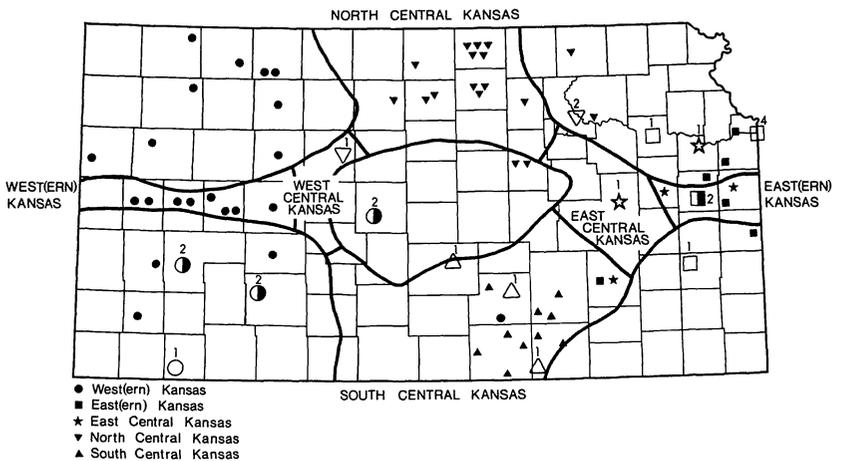


FIGURE 6: Prominent local vernacular regions (those listed on 30 percent or more of questionnaires from two or more adjacent counties). Isolines indicate the percentage of questionnaire respondents who volunteered the particular term. Areas above 50 percent are shaded. Point symbols indicate where particular terms are used as part of a business or service organization name (for details see Figure 2 caption).

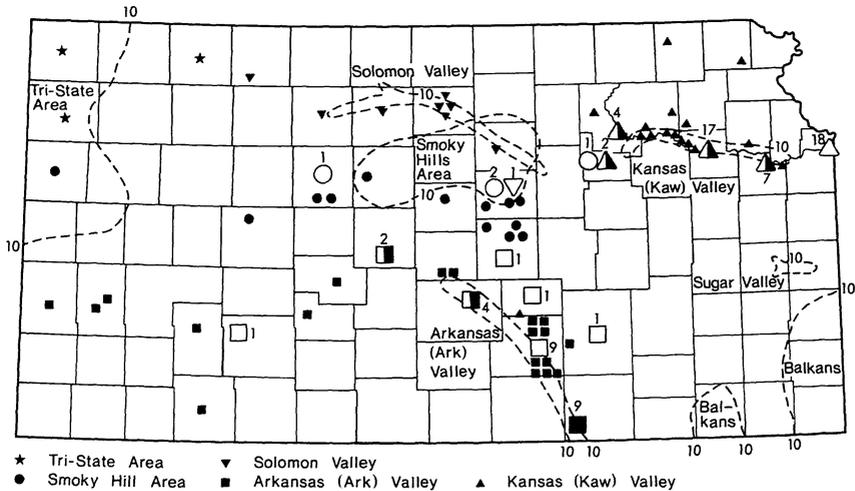


FIGURE 7: Less prominent local vernacular regions (those listed on between ten and thirty percent of questionnaires from two or more adjacent counties). Isolines indicate the percentage of questionnaire respondents who volunteered the particular term. Point symbols indicate where particular terms are used as part of a business or service organization name (for details see Figure 2 caption).

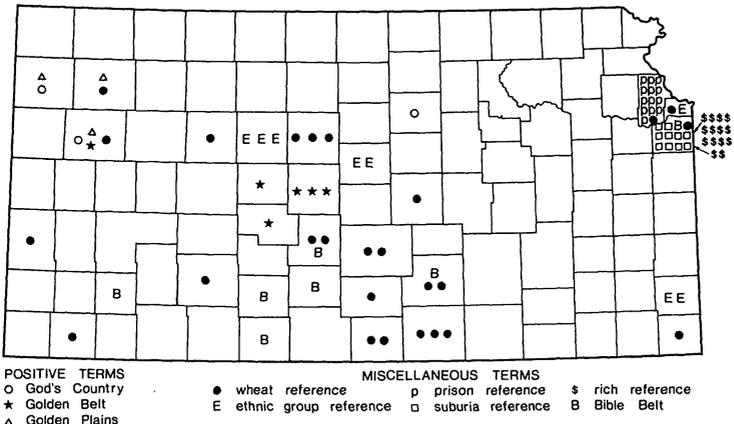


FIGURE 8: Positive and miscellaneous vernacular terms. Symbols indicate individual responses volunteered on the questionnaires.

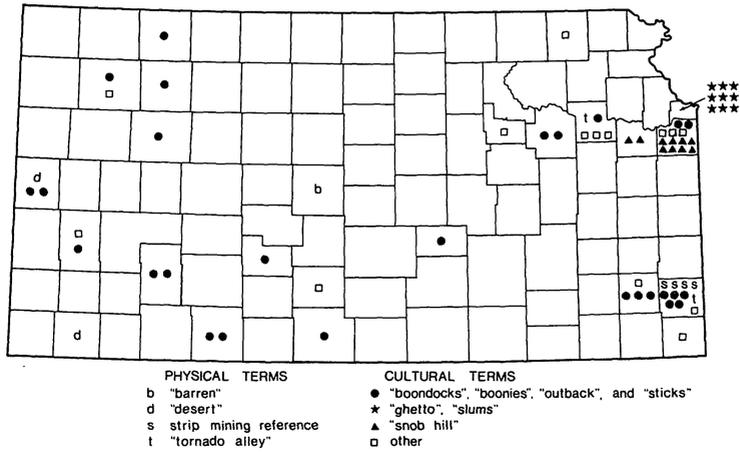


FIGURE 9: Negative vernacular terms. Symbols indicate individual responses volunteered on the questionnaires.

The practice of using university students to sample regional opinion has ample precedent, but the reader should keep in mind the age and other biases inherent in this research decision. For example, it is possible that the college students sampled represent a more urban background than is normal for each county. Assuming that urban people would not be quite as familiar with local regional terms as rural ones would be, this would make the regional measures presented here somewhat conservative. Another bias may be that younger people have a more negative attitude toward their home county than does its general population. I address this issue in the text section on positive and negative images.⁸

Small sample size in many of the counties limits the reliability of the questionnaire data, but this problem can be ameliorated by simultaneously mapping regional phrases used in telephone directories as parts of business and service organization names. I examined current telephone books for every Kansas town, and made counts of all regional terms encountered. The initial lists were then modified slightly by eliminating branch offices of businesses and by adding all high school athletic conferences that bore regional names. Each member town of such a conference was counted and mapped separately.

The questionnaire and business survey data together produce a reasonably representative picture of Kansas vernacular regions. The business survey provides a check on the age and other possible biases associated with the college questionnaire sample; the questionnaire information helps to overcome the problem of small sample size of regional business names in the more rural parts of the state. Most of the distribution maps illustrating this article carry information from both data sources (Figs. 2-7). In most instances isolines are employed to present the questionnaire information for a given regional term; point symbols generally mark locations of businesses using the same name.

the great plains and the middle west

A logical place to begin a consideration of how Kansans see their regional associations is with the terms Great Plains and Middle West. These names are applied frequently to all manner of situations, from weather forecasts and agricultural systems to political attitudes and food preferences. Everyone knows the phrases, it seems, but, when one looks for precise definitions and delimitations, little consensus emerges. One person's Middle West may be only east of the Mississippi River, for example, while another's may lie completely to the west of that river. When the Middle West is considered in conjunction with the Great Plains, even greater confusion seems to exist. Geography textbooks tend to view the two places as mutually exclusive in physical, economic, and even cultural senses.⁹ The boundary passes north and south through Kansas at various locations between one-third and two-

thirds of the way across the state. Is this the way Kansans perceive the situation? A personal experience suggests not. When I first taught the regional geography of the United States at the University of Kansas and was ready to lecture on the general midsection of the country, I decided to have my students define this "obvious" boundary. I determined the home towns of the group, arranged them in a general east-west sequence, and then, in class, systematically asked each student which regional term they used. Contrary to my expectations, the Middle West did not stop midway across the state, but extended far into Colorado. Great Plains was a term known to most but was seen to operate at a different, somehow inferior, level from the Middle West.

To elicit a more comprehensive set of perceptions by Kansans regarding their affiliation with the Middle West and the Great Plains, students were asked directly on the questionnaire whether or not their "home" counties were part of these places. A separate question was posed for each term, so as not to imply that the two regions were necessarily mutually exclusive.¹⁰

As best as I can determine from an examination of the journals and maps of the major explorers and travellers in the trans-Mississippi West, the term Great Plains was first employed in the late 1840s. Neither Pike nor Long mention it, but after being used on an 1848 map by John C. Fremont, it appears frequently.¹¹ John Wesley Powell used the term throughout his famous *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* in 1878, and subsequently it was accepted by scientists as the name for a major physiographic division of the country. A study in 1903 marked its eastern boundary in Kansas as the Flint Hills, and modern students have adhered to this practice.¹² Non-physical scientists apparently have been slower to adopt the Great Plains label. The widely circulated travel accounts of Albert Richardson (1857-67), Horace Greeley (1859) and Samuel Bowles (1869) do not contain the phrase, and it may well not have been until Walter P. Webb published his influential *The Great Plains* in 1931 that the general public was exposed to a broader, more humanistic perspective on the term.¹³

The Great Plains in Kansas as perceived by Kansas students matches precisely the region as defined by physiographers (Fig. 2).¹⁴ The Flint Hills obviously form the transition zone with the fifty per cent isoline on one of its flanks and the seventy per cent one on the other. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the map is the low frequency in which Great Plains appears as part of a business name. With forty-one occurrences it is far outranked by Middle West and is even exceeded by several regionally more restricted labels (Figs. 3-4, 6-7). This low response suggests that, although Kansans know the name Great Plains, it is not part of their vernacular usage. Another indication that this is the case comes from the questionnaires. Nearly a fifth of the respondents who acknowledged that their counties were in

the Great Plains followed their “yes” with an “I guess” or similar hesitant phrase. In spite of Webb’s efforts, Great Plains residents apparently still do not use the term easily.¹⁵

The history of the phrase Middle West is not nearly so easy to trace as is that of the Great Plains. My initial research with popular literature suggests that the name goes back no farther than the 1890s, when it, for some reason, replaced Middle Border, Old Northwest, and perhaps other terms. The connotations of Middle West as a regional label remain largely unexplored, but my impression is that its usage has been restricted to the human rather than the physical realm.¹⁶

Kansans obviously see the Middle West in their state quite differently from the way they do the Great Plains (Fig. 3). The term finds acceptance at a fairly high and uniform level across the state. A majority of people from every county said that their home areas were part of the Middle West, and the figure was sixty percent or above in all but two southeastern counties. A second important point in contrast with the Great Plains situation is that Middle West appears to be widely used as a vernacular term. Middle West (or Midwest) appears no less than 322 times as part of a Kansas business name, a figure nearly eight times the total for Great Plains usage.

The variations in intensity shown on Figure 3 are intriguing, but should not be overly stressed. In the first place the variations are rather minor, with only four counties above ninety percent and eleven counties below sixty-five percent. More importantly, the business name data distribution fails to match the isoline pattern. With these caveats understood, the obvious association of the two major regions of lower response in eastern Kansas with the Flint Hills and their grazing economy may be noted. Perhaps the pastoral life style leads residents to dissociate themselves from the Middle West to a degree, preferring “West” as an identifier. Consistent with this interpretation would be the east-west corridor of higher Middle West perception separating the two Flint Hills lows, with its relatively large and urban population clustered along the Kansas River and Interstate Highway 70. Were it not for the rise of Middle West allegiance in extreme southwestern Kansas one could interpret the three areas of lower response in western Kansas as a gradual transition of allegiance from Middle West to “West” and “Southwest.” Indeed five people from southwestern counties specifically noted on their questionnaires that they felt this to be the case. Such a falloff also would be consistent with the findings of another survey of the extent of the Middle West.¹⁷ The temptation to dismiss the higher isoline in the extreme southwest as an irregularity caused by small sample size is thus strong, but the relatively high frequency of Middle West as a business name in such towns as Liberal, Dodge City and Garden City makes one cautious. The situation obviously needs more study.

It seems clear from the information on Figures 2 and 3 that students of American regionalization should exercise caution when dividing the midsection of the country into Great Plains and Middle-western components. Certainly obvious physical differences exist between the Great Plains and the area to its east, and in many cases these distinctions have led to agricultural and other economic differentiation. It does not necessarily follow, however, that there is a division of basic cultural values. However defined, the Middle West and the Great Plains were settled by peoples of similar heritage, and strong Middle-western allegiance obviously occurs to the westernmost extent of the Kansas plains and quite possibly beyond. A recent study demonstrates the inconsistent nature of Kansas in cultural terms, finding significant east-west variations across the state in such measures as choice of given names, rates of magazine subscription, and church membership ratios, but no such pattern in linguistic or religious denomination data or in a survey of "western" attitudes.¹⁸ Although conclusive statements certainly are not justified from the data at hand, it seems reasonable to assume that, in a broad cultural sense, the Great Plains may be considered as a subdivision of the Middle West, an area that identifies itself with the larger region yet possesses a measure of distinctiveness brought about by such factors as climate and isolation.

The importance of understanding the relationships among allegiances to Middle West and Great Plains in Kansas and elsewhere lies in differing public conceptions of these terms. Although lucid essays on the personality of each region exist, these remain of limited utility in the absence of accurate spatial information.¹⁹ If my study resolves some questions about the distribution of the two labels, it opens the issue of possible Kansas associations with "West" and "Southwest". The possibility that associations change through time remains completely unexplored.

directional terms

At a scale of allegiances or identifications intermediate between Middle West and such smaller places as river valleys, directional terms often are employed as regional labels. It is interesting to speculate on the accuracy of this usage. For example, if "western", when used to describe a part of Kansas, has the positive connotations characteristic of the word "West" generally in America, one might expect people from central sections of the state to associate themselves with it. On the other hand, if "western" is perceived to have more of the image of rural backwardness suggested by certain studies of plains states culture, the vernacular boundary of "western" Kansas might be located far toward the Rockies.²⁰

To provide information on the usage of directional terms, business

name data again were combined with questionnaire responses. With the business names, only those that included the word Kansas or its abbreviation as part of the title were included. This restriction was necessary to avoid confusions over whether a given directional term referred to a section of a city or perhaps of the country as a whole, rather than of the state. The wording on the questionnaire item was as follows:

Residents of most parts of Kansas identify their home counties by using one of the compass directions. Which, if any, of the following terms is used locally to identify the location of your county? If appropriate, more than one blank can be checked. Check only terms you have heard used by the inhabitants of the county.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| – East(ern) Kansas | – Central Kansas |
| – North(ern) Kansas | – East Central Kansas |
| – South(ern) Kansas | – North Central Kansas |
| – West(ern) Kansas | – South Central Kansas |
| – Northeast(ern) Kansas | – West Central Kansas |
| – Southeast(ern) Kansas | – None of these are used by local |
| – Northwest(ern) Kansas | people to describe my county |
| – Southwest(ern) Kansas | – Other (please specify) _____ |

Of the thirteen positive choices offered on the questionnaire, eleven were noted to be dominant in at least one county apiece (Figs. 4 and 5). Only “northern” and “southern” were not used, hardly a surprising result given the shape and compass orientation of the state. Because of an obvious need for subdivision along the long axis, “north central” and “south central” are much more common terms and occupy larger areas than “east central” and “west central”.

The business name data reveal some details of the directional term vernacular regions. Most interesting, perhaps, is the use of “east” and “west”. Whereas these terms appear in logical distributions on the questionnaire responses, they definitely have been skewed by the business community. “East(ern)” is restricted almost exclusively to the eastern three columns of counties, no matter whether it appears as “northeast(ern),” “southeast(ern),” “east central”, or in its unmodified form. “West(ern),” in contrast, ranges in its various forms over five or six columns of counties and even makes solitary appearances in Saline and Sedgwick Counties, definitely in the eastern half of the state. It is also revealing that “west(ern)” in its unmodified form is used more frequently than “east(ern)” and “east central” combined, despite the much greater population of eastern Kansas. A similar situation exists for “northwest(ern)” and “northeast(ern)”. Apparently “west(ern)” is seen by Kansas businessmen to have an overall positive image about it. If there are negative associations borne of the dryness, flatness and isolation of the area, these are more than counterbalanced by such

traditional positive images of the West as friendliness and independence.²¹

prominent local regions

A certain degree of predictability applies to the choice of directional terms as regional labels, and existing studies provided hints as to what this Kansas survey might reveal about the Middle West and Great Plains. At a more local level, however, there are almost no guidelines. Questions of all kinds occur. Are local regions more likely to bear human or physical labels? What role do promotional efforts play in name popularity? What kinds of places are perceived most intensely?

The questionnaire item used to gather information on local vernacular regions was worded as follows:

Many parts of Kansas have a special regional name, or popular name. Examples of such popular names from adjacent states are "Sand Hills" (in Nebraska), "Western Slope" (in Colorado), "Little Dixie" (in Oklahoma), and "Boonslick" and "Ozarks" (in Missouri). What popular name is used to describe the area containing your home county in Kansas? If more than one popular name is used, list all of them. If none are used, please so indicate.

Where at least thirty percent of the respondents from two or more adjacent counties listed a particular vernacular term, a "prominent" local region was said to be defined (Fig. 6). "Less prominent" local regions were those mentioned by between ten and thirty percent of the respondents (Fig. 7).²²

Six "prominent" local regions exist in Kansas, led in intensity by the Flint Hills. It perhaps should come as no surprise that in relatively flat and sparsely populated Kansas, physical features, particularly hills, should be items that have strong holds on the local consciousness. With the exception of Dust Bowl all of the names date from the nineteenth century. Promotional names for regions, those coined by government bureaus, chambers of commerce, and other boosters, were mentioned only infrequently by respondents. Such names are not yet part of the Kansas vernacular, even though in Texas they are reported to be dominant in several places.²³

The Flint Hills is by far the most strongly perceived regional label in Kansas. In its heartland over seven out of ten respondents volunteered the term, and the fifty percent isoline encompasses most of nine counties. Telephone book data mirror the questionnaire information perfectly, even to the identification of the regional core in Chase and Lyon Counties. Eight Emporia businesses use the term, but this is far exceeded on a per capita basis by the six occurrences in the small twin towns of Cottonwood Falls and Strong City. Another indication of the

strength of Flint Hills as a regional term is its frequent use as a reference location by people living throughout eastern Kansas. Twenty questionnaire respondents from outside the nine county core area noted that their locales were “near” or “at the edge of” the Flint Hills.

The high level of perception accorded the Flint Hills probably is only partly a function of its physical distinctiveness. The core of the area is a layered benchland composed of slightly dipping limestones and shales augmented by occasional lenses of flint. Its local relief averages about 350 feet, a high figure for Kansas, but not greatly exceeding the relief of the cuesta plain occupying eastern Kansas generally. The regional uniqueness is more a product of vegetation and historical land use. The Flint Hills is a ranching island in the midst of farming country, a place of immense, sometimes almost overwhelming, prairie vistas. A sparse population is tucked away in valleys, leaving a landscape that strikes many travellers along Interstate Highways 35 and 70 as primeval.

The Flint Hills name dates from at least the early 1870s, but originally was a geological term more than a regional description. Physical scientists still use the phrase in this earlier way and, as a result, portrayals based on geology and soil tend to be smaller in area than the one outlined here and shifted about half a county's width to the west. By the second decade of this century, however, the Flint Hills term came to have a broader definition in the public mind, a name for the general area where cattle ranching predominated. The present study confirms this, the delineation matching closely that found in an earlier survey of the big pasture country.²⁴

After the Flint Hills the two regions of greatest local relief in Kansas are the Blue Hills and the Gypsum (Gyp) Hills. Like the Flint Hills, both are essentially cuesta landforms. With their 200 to 300 foot escarpments facing eastward, they were easily visible to westward moving travellers and were named by at least the middle of the nineteenth century. This combination of physical and historical visibility seems to be the reason for their recognition today. According to the results from the questionnaires, the vernacular regions match the cores of the physical features. A certain confusion surrounds both of the names. “Blue” is alternately said to derive from the color of the Pierre Shale present in the area or “in allusion to the bluish haze the atmosphere frequently presents when looking at the hills from a distance.”²⁵ The “Gyp” story is a bit more complicated. Standard physiographic sources label the escarpments of south Kansas as the Red Hills, a term apparently coined by G.I. Adams in 1903.²⁶ Red is an accurate descriptive word, referring to the color of the local Permian sediments, but residents use the term only for a small area in Clark County. Cedar Hills is used for another small section in eastern Barber County, but the bulk of the region is known as the Gyp Hills, a name com-

memorating the resistant gypsum layer that caps the escarpments. One can understand Adams's motives in desiring a general term for the physiographic unit, but by not checking on local usage, he created a needless gap between academic and vernacular terminology.

No telephone book entries use Blue Hills as part of their name and only one incorporates the Gyp Hills phrase. Both situations probably can be explained by the limited size of the regions and their small populations. The Sand Hills, another of the "prominent" local vernacular regions in the state, similarly lacks telephone entries but occupies a larger area and has a larger population in its immediate vicinity than do either the Blue or the Gyp Hills. This avoidance of Sand Hills as a business name suggests that the region may be perceived in neutral or perhaps even in slightly negative terms, recognized but not loved. The actual physical extent and relative size of the sand fields are accurately mirrored in the vernacular regionalization, however.

Since Kansas repeatedly has been described as the quintessence of a plains state, it is of special interest to see the form and extent of this term's vernacular usage. Although a considerable variety of plains phrases were listed on the completed questionnaires, the only one to meet even a minimal criterion of being noted by ten percent of the respondents from two or more adjacent counties was High Plains.²⁷ Great Plains, the term used by academicians to describe the whole region from the Rocky Mountains eastward for 500 or 600 miles, was listed only thirty-four times on the questionnaires, half the total for High Plains.²⁸

It has been asserted that High Plains is an older term than Great Plains,²⁹ although I can find no corroborative evidence of this in the academic literature. Whereas Great Plains occurs on John C. Fremont's map of 1848 and on many subsequent ones, I find no printed reference to High Plains before 1901.³⁰ In that year W. D. Johnson published "The High Plains and their Utilization," a classical work defining this area as the nearly undissected portion of the Great Plains extending from the Llano Estacado in Texas to the vicinity of the Platte River in Nebraska.³¹ Johnson's usage implies that the definition he employs was common knowledge at the time of his work; this in turn suggests that High Plains has long existed as a vernacular expression. Certainly the region is strongly perceived today, both on the questionnaire responses and the business name survey.

Academicians since the day of Johnson have followed his procedure of making the High Plains a subdivision of the Great Plains, with its Kansas portion extending from the Colorado border eastward to the Blue and Gyp Hills.³² The vernacular region approximates this in a general way, but is more restrictive. North of the Arkansas River one must use the marginal ten percent isoline to touch the academician's eastern border; in the south, even this is inadequate. A possible

explanation for the discrepancy in the south involves population location and competition of regional names. Whereas most of the northwestern Kansas population is found on the upland, southwestern Kansans cluster in the Arkansas Valley. These people might well identify more closely with the more immediate labels of Sand Hills and Arkansas Valley than with a plains term.

Promotional efforts by various news media seem to play a greater role with the High Plains label than with the terms previously discussed. Many questionnaire respondents noted that radio stations KXXX of Colby and KLOE of Goodland both advertise themselves as "The Voice of the High Plains," and Goodland television features the "High Plains News." The term also is frequently used on agricultural and weather reports by radio stations ranging from Amarillo, Texas, and the Oklahoma panhandle throughout the western third of Kansas. An influential agricultural newspaper, *The High Plains Journal*, is published in Dodge City, and a high school athletic conference in extreme southwestern Kansas also bears the name. The widespread use of the High Plains phrase by the media suggests that the term is seen in a positive light in western Kansas, and this popularity probably explains why businesses even beyond the ten percent isoline of the perceptual region use the name. One finds examples as far east as Salina and Wichita. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume too great a role for the media in the popularity of the name High Plains. Golden Plains, a term promoted by station KXXX in Colby even more actively than it does High Plains, was listed on the completed questionnaires only three times.

Unlike the other regions on Figure 6, Dust Bowl is both a physical and a human term, and is a name whose origin is known precisely. It was coined at Guymon, in the Oklahoma panhandle, in April of 1935, to describe the aftermath of a large dust roller. As drought conditions worsened in the general area throughout the year, Dust Bowl was adopted as a regional descriptive term.³³ There is thus a definite historical component to its usage, and I was surprised to see it appear so regularly on the completed questionnaires. In telephone interviews some local residents agreed that the term was used only in a historical sense, but the majority felt that it had current applicability. Dust storms are a part of the natural cycle in the area, they said, occurring before the famous 1930s and continuing to the present.³⁴ The majority of the twenty-five people interviewed on the subject also felt that Dust Bowl today was something of an "insider's" term, a phrase residents use among themselves but see as derogatory if used by non-residents. This feeling is partially confirmed by the absence of the phrase as a business term.

less prominent local regions

When the criterion for defining a vernacular region is dropped

from thirty to ten percent of the respondents from two or more adjacent counties, seven additional areas appear on the map (Fig. 7). As was the case with the more strongly perceived regions, physical terms predominate, but valleys replace hills as the most popular feature. The relative popularity of hills and valleys is intriguing. The valleys certainly are more productive regions in an economic sense and contain a larger proportion of the state's population; with their blufflands they are also areas of considerable local relief. Perhaps the hills derive their stronger recognition in part simply by being somewhat exotic, removed a bit from the population clusters.

Little needs to be said about the specific valley regions. The Arkansas, Kansas, and Solomon Rivers are the largest in the state by most measures, and are the ones one would expect to be recognized. The Kansas River was virtually always referred to by respondents as the Kaw, a nickname which predates the settlement period;³⁵ Ark was used for Arkansas approximately half the time, especially by people living where the river exits from the state at Ark (never Arkansas) City. The appearance of the small Sugar Valley on the map is a definite anomaly, especially when several much larger streams including the Neosho and Republican Rivers were rarely mentioned on the questionnaire sheets.

It was predictable that the Smoky Hills would appear on this map, for after the Flint, Blue, and Gyp Hills, it is the most rugged area in the state. These hills are composed of Dakota Sandstone, a reddish, somewhat irregularly bedded rock that is visually quite distinct from the whitish, more uniform limestones that dominate most other parts of Kansas. As was the case with the Blue and Gyp Hills, the vernacular region matches the most rugged part of the physical area.

Tri-state, one of the two human terms to appear on Figure 7, obviously derives its name from the proximity of Colorado and Nebraska to northwestern Kansas. Its popularity is reinforced by three business names and by frequent reference on Goodland's station KLOE. Analogous regional term usage has developed in two other corners of the state, but because of boundary locations, name competition occurs and no term has become dominant. "Tri-state" and "four-state" coexist in the southeast and, in the southwest, these two are joined by "five-state." For some reason, similar terms are rare in northeastern Kansas.

Balkans, in southeastern Kansas, is a term similar in several ways to Dust Bowl. Both names date from specific occurrences and refer to aspects of local history that some would like to forget. The terms are anathema to businesses but sometimes are used with a certain degree of pride by local residents. The Balkans appellation derives from the era of deep-shaft coal mining in northern Cherokee and eastern Crawford Counties. The mining boom was accompanied by "prolonged and bitter strikes, rioting, occupation by state militia, killings, thefts, robberies and habitual breaking of the Kansas prohibitory liquor

law.”³⁶ Continuing trouble supposedly led Walter Stubbs, the Kansas governor from 1909 to 1913, to exclaim that the region “is just like the Balkans,” a reference, of course, to the European region that was then a center of discord.³⁷ The appropriateness of the analogy is strengthened by the presence in southeastern Kansas of an ethnically mixed population, including many people of south European ancestry, as well as an extended economic decline in the area after 1930.³⁸ Judging from the remarks made on the completed questionnaires, some people, remembering the poverty and lawlessness connotations, see Balkans as a derogatory word; others interpret it positively, as a symbol of the region’s unique ethnic heritage. The focus of the term’s usage today is Pittsburg, in Crawford County, the center of the local coal industry. Montgomery County appears as an outlier even though it lacks coal, probably because it also has a mineral industry heritage, particularly zinc smelting, and an ethnically mixed population.

positive, negative and miscellaneous perceptions

The assertion that Great Plains residents suffer from a slight inferiority complex was mentioned briefly in the discussion of directional terms. More insight into this issue as well as other aspects of regional consciousness is possible by dividing the questionnaire responses into positive and negative perceptions. If one considers Great Plains to be more descriptive than laudatory, the positive list consists of only three items and a total of twelve responses: Golden Belt, Golden Plains, and God’s Country (Fig. 8).³⁹ Golden refers to the color of wheat at harvest as well as to the money it represents. The meaning of God’s Country is less clear. It would seem to be complimentary, but one of the three users of the phrase followed it with “nobody else would want it.”

Negative perceptions of Kansas might be expected to emphasize physical elements of the environment, following the lead of many plains novels. Only nine responses fit into this category, however. One reference to “barren” and two to “desert” were reported from the western half of the state, two to “tornado alley” in the east, and four to strip mining pits in the coal county of Crawford (Fig. 9). Negative cultural references were over six times as common as negative physical ones.⁴⁰ The most widespread of these derogatory terms were “boonies,” “boondocks,” and “sticks”, words suggesting a dissatisfaction with ruralness, with being isolated from the perceived mainstream of the country. On a per capita basis, western Kansans used these words more frequently than did easterners. It is well to keep in mind the age of the respondents while assessing these (as well as the other) negative images. Home frequently looks less than perfect to eighteen to twenty-two year old people anxious to see what the wider world has to offer them.

Although detailed investigation of the Kansas image lies beyond the scope of this study, several lines of evidence suggest that negativism is not restricted to my college sample. Studies conducted in the 1960s, for example, revealed that college students from Alabama, California, Illinois, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania generally rated their home states as highly desirable places in which to live, whereas students from North Dakota, a plains state like Kansas, saw their homes as only moderately desirable. Using current data, when the ratio of positive to negative home county images is compared for young Kansans and young Texans, the Texas self-perceptions are much more positive.⁴¹ Interpretations of Kansas appearing in the popular literature also support this view, routinely beginning with an admission of the state's nationwide poor image. Stephen Darst's words from 1974 are typical:

When outsiders think of Kansas at all they are apt to dust off shopworn images of cow towns before the turn of the century . . . or the type of changless life depicted in the movie "Picnic" with its opening longshot of mammoth Hutchinson grain elevators looming beside the Santa Fe tracks that stretch endlessly away into an all-pervading flatness, moral, cultural, social, topographical, political.⁴²

Some authors proceed to justify the image and others to challenge it, but the important point is that virtually all recognize that it exists.

Two highly localized areas of negative self-images deserve discussion. Over a third of the respondents from Wyandotte County said that people described their Kansas City home as a "ghetto" or "the slums." In sharp contrast, adjacent Johnson County, along with Douglas County, were occasionally given the label "snob hill." As I have described more fully elsewhere, the Wyandotte-Johnson County line is the sharpest cultural divide in the state.⁴³ Wyandotte County is a blue-collar, industrial area. It votes Democratic and contains large ethnic and black populations. In all of these ways it contrasts with the rest of Kansas. Johnson County is almost the antithesis of Wyandotte County, being the personification of well-to-do suburbia. The term "snob hill" specifically refers to Mission Hills, perhaps the most prestigious address in the greater Kansas City area. The use of "snob hill" in Douglas County is connected to the University of Kansas there, whose campus occupies a hilltop and traditionally attracts large numbers of Johnson County students. By extension the term also is used in the friendly rivalry that exists between this school and Kansas State University. K-State alleges that KU is "snob hill"; KU responds that K-State with its agricultural school, is "silo tech."

More insight into the sharply contrasting self-images of the Kansas City area counties can be seen on Figure 8. Several Johnson Countians used "suburban" and "rich" to describe their home. Most of these references appear to be purely descriptive, but a few respondents used

the terms in derogatory ways. Two “suburbias” were prefaced by “faceless,” two “riches” were paired with “snob” and four other people wrote “rich bitch area.” Leavenworth County has an identity quite distinct from either Johnson or Wyandotte. In reference to the one federal, one military, and two state prisons in this county of only 30,000 people, over half of the local respondents called their home the “prison area” or a similar term.

Three other miscellaneous regional perceptions were volunteered on the questionnaires with enough regularity to deserve mention: ethnic references, wheat references, and Bible Belt. The first two categories were reported in straight-forward, accurate fashion. Wheat production is concentrated in the south central portion of Kansas, very much as the perceptual map has it. The ethnic references are also factual: Volga Germans in Ellis County, Czechs in Ellsworth County, Italians in Crawford County, and Slavs in Wyandotte County. No ethnic slurs were written. An interesting anomaly is the omission of any reference to the numerous Mennonite settlements of central Kansas. Bible Belt was mentioned only seven times on the questionnaires, but six of these are clustered in the south central part of the state. One can hardly generalize from this small sample, and I am not even sure whether the term was used in a derogatory or a positive sense. There is no obvious correlation between this location and high rates of either church membership or fundamentalist church orientation, but the location is such that it could link up with the indications of a perceptual Bible Belt found in northern and eastern Texas by a procedure identical to the one used here.⁴⁴ A specific Bible Belt questionnaire needs to be given.

conclusion

Vernacular regions are a matter of considerable practical importance. For people trying to discern general culture or humanistic areas for planning and other purposes, perceived regions are the ones that matter. This study underscores the need for additional research by noting several types of discrepancies between traditional regionalizations and vernacular ones. Vernacular regions exist that rarely are recognized as distinct places today by social scientists, and the converse condition may also occur. The Dust Bowl and the Balkans are examples of the former situation; the Great Plains is perhaps one of the latter. There also are cases, such as the Flint Hills, where perceived location and extent are somewhat different from those found in standard academic sources. Name discrepancies occur as well, as the example of Red Hills—Gyp Hills demonstrates. The fact that some areas clearly lack “prominent” local regional names also may have important implications. Are there differences in levels of group identity or ecological consciousness between these areas and those, such as the

Flint Hills counties, which are strongly regionally affiliated? If group identity levels vary in this way, perhaps they may be reflected in such measures as out-migration rates and number of natives returning to the regions after college graduation or retirement.

Comparisons between vernacular regions and traditional cultural regions are difficult to make for Kansas because detailed work with linguistic, political, religious and similar data is not abundant. Nevertheless, two interesting observations are possible. A recent summary of linguistic information for the state suggests that several North Midland terms fade from use in extreme western Kansas, and that several Southwestern words have their eastern limit there. The percentage of people belonging to churches also increases in that area.⁴⁵ This information may help to resolve the discrepancy between the questionnaire and the business name survey data on the decline of Middlewestern allegiance in western Kansas and suggests that the term High Plains may carry meaning to its residents beyond mere physical description. The only other section of Kansas indicated to have distinctiveness by cultural measures is the southeastern corner. Several South Midland and Southern words have been recorded there and both a political and a religious regionalization of the nation suggest a Southern association for this area.⁴⁶ These findings are at odds with my vernacular survey unless the term Balkans has overtones of "Southernness" in addition to those traits discussed in the text. Detailed field study in this area is needed.

Monitoring the changing strengths and types of vernacular regions over a period of years is another promising avenue for research. Perhaps one could develop a measure of local attachment from such data that would be useful for cultural ecologists and others interested in "sense of place." Periodic surveys also should reveal something of the relative strengths of folk and popular culture. As stated elsewhere in this paper, promotional terms generated by government bureaus, chambers of commerce, and their kin apparently have received little acceptance in Kansas. Such terms continue to be placed before the eyes and ears of the people, however, and one wonders not only when and where they will "take root," but what acceptance will mean in a cultural sense.

notes

I wish to thank Charles Cantiello for compiling the telephone book data on which this study is partially based and the following people for distributing questionnaires at their respective campuses: Charles Bussing, Kansas State University; Robert Hilt, Pittsburg State University; Paul Phillips, Ft. Hays State University; and William Phillips, Emporia State University. My colleagues at Dartmouth provided valuable comments on early drafts of the paper.

1. Good introductions to the "sense of place" concept are René Dubos, *A God Within* (New York, 1972), Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapo-

lis, 1977), and in numerous writings by the poet-essayists Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder. "A Continuous Harmony" is the title of a 1972 book (New York).

2. "A Sociological Approach to the Study and Practice of American Regionalism: A Factorial Syllabus," *Social Forces*, XX (1942), 430.

3. Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), 112; Yi-fu Tuan, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," *Geographical Review*, LXV (1975), 152. See also David Ley and Marwyn Samuels, eds., *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems* (Chicago, 1978).

4. Two examples are Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers* (New York, 1962), 11, 104 and Suzanne Keller, *The Urban Neighborhood* (New York, 1968), 98.

5. The most recent and widely available examples of the two types are: John S. Reed, "The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography," *Social Forces*, LIV (1976), 925-939, for business names; and Terry G. Jordan, "Perceptual Regions in Texas," *Geographical Review*, LXVIII (1978), 293-307, for questionnaires. See also Ruth Hale, "A Map of Vernacular Regions in America" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971). Additional references can be found in the Jordan article.

6. Jordan.

7. The students were instructed that their "home" county need not be the one of their birth, but it should be the one they identify with most closely.

8. On the relationship between parental and adolescent values and attitudes see William A. Wesley and Frederick Elkin, "The Protective Environment and Adolescent Socialization," *Social Forces*, XXXV (1957), 243-249.

9. See, for example, Zelinsky, 118-119, 128-130; C. Langdon White, Edwin J. Foscue, Tom L. McKnight, *Regional Geography of Anglo-America*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), 289-377, and J.H. Paterson, *North America: A Geography of Canada and the United States*, 5th ed. (New York, 1975), 181-213, 253-273.

10. The questions read as follows: "Is your 'home' county part of the Middle West?" and "Is your 'home' county part of the Great Plains?" These questions were the last two asked in order to minimize effects that the mention of the two terms might have on responses to other questionnaire items.

11. Fremont's "Map of Oregon and Upper California" which includes the Great Plains listing is reproduced in Carl I. Wheat, *Mapping the Transmississippi West: 1540-1861*. III (San Francisco, 1959), 146. For background see G. Malcolm Lewis, "The Cognition and Communication of Former Ideas about the Great Plains," in *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture*, eds. Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, 1979), 27-41.

12. The Powell report originally appeared as H.R. Exec Doc. 73, 45th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.); G.I. Adams, "Physiographic Divisions of Kansas," *Transactions, Kansas Academy of Science*, XVIII (1903), 110; Walter H. Schoewe, "The Geography of Kansas, Part II: Physical Geography," *Transactions, Kansas Academy of Science*, LI (1949), 273-276; William D. Thornbury, *Regional Geomorphology of the United States* (New York, 1965), 278-321.

13. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi* (Hartford, Conn. [etc.] 1867); Greeley, *An Overland Journey, from New York to San Francisco, in the Summer of 1859* (New York, 1860) Bowles, *Our New West* (Hartford, Conn., 1869); Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York, 1931).

14. In order to minimize the effects of small sample size a smoothing process was employed in the compilation of the Great Plains map as well as in those of the Middle West and High Plains. The ratio figure used for each county was the mean of its own ratio and those of all adjacent counties.

15. The evidence for this claim is further bolstered by the low rate at which the term was volunteered in response to another questionnaire item. For discussion see section entitled "Prominent Local Regions."

16. Good introductions to the subject include Graham Hutton, *Midwest at Noon* (Chicago, 1946); Frank R. Kramer, *Voices in the Valley: Mythmaking and Folk Belief in the Shaping of the Middle West* (Madison, 1964), and Thomas T. McAvoy, ed., *The Midwest: Myth or Reality?* (Notre Dame, 1961).

17. Joseph W. Brownell, "The Cultural Midwest," *Journal of Geography*, LIX (1960), 81-85.

18. Paul E. Phillips, "An Assessment of the Validity on an East-West Cultural Dichotomy for Kansas" (unpublished dissertation, Dept. of Geography, University of Kansas, 1977).

19. For the Great Plains see John W. Bennett, *Northern Plainsmen: Adaptive Strategy and Agrarian Life* (Chicago, 1969) and E. Cotton Mather, "The American Great Plains," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, LXI(1972), 237-257; for the Middle West see Ruth Suckow, "Middle Western Literature," *The English Journal*, XXI(1932), 175-182; Joseph E. Baker, "The Middle West: A Case of Identity" *University of Kansas City Review* XXIV(1958), 249-255; and David D. Anderson, "Notes Toward a Definition of the Mind of the Midwest," *Midamerica*, III(1976), 7-16. Among the best statements of the general Kansas personality are two articles by the novelist-biographer Kenneth S. Davis in the *New York Times Magazine*: "That Strange State of Mind Called Kansas" (June 26, 1949), 13ff. and

"What's The Matter with Kansas?" (June 27, 1954), 12ff. and a classic essay by Carl Becker: "Kansas," in *Essays in American History Dedicated to Frederick Jackson Turner* (New York, 1910), 85-111. See also Lorrin Leland, ed. *The Kansas Experience in Poetry* (Lawrence, 1978), James C. Malin, "Kansas: Some Reflections on Culture Inheritance and Originality," *Journal of the Mississippi Valley American Studies Association*, II, No. 2 (Fall 1961), 3-19, and the "Jericho" novels by Paul I. Wellman.

20. Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (Baltimore, 1974), 102-103, Mather.

21. Phillips, 35-71.

22. The exact percentages used to define the two intensities are arbitrary. It may appear presumptuous to label regions mentioned by a minority of respondents as "prominent," but my experience suggests that where even ten percent of the respondents listed a particular term on the questionnaire, virtually all of the people from that area would recognize it.

23. A sampling of promotional terms reported on the questionnaires includes: Crossroads of America (Allen, Republic and Saline Cos.: all locations of major highway intersections), Golden Buckle on the Wheat Belt (Thomas Co.), Gunsmoke Country (Ford and Gray Cos.: a reference to the radio and television program set in Dodge City), Heart of America (Johnson, Leavenworth and Wyandotte Cos.: a Kansas City media term), Heart Section (eight southeastern-most counties) and Little Switzerland (Doniphan Co.: a reference to the local loess hills promoted by state government agencies). Several other promotional terms are noted in the text. Since promotional terms typically originate in urban centers, the Texas-Kansas discrepancy may be related to the relative size and number of metropolitan areas in the two states (Jordan, 298-303).

24. Historical information is from James C. Malin, "An Introduction to the History of the Bluestem Pasture Region of Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XI (1942), 7-8. Physical and ranching delineations are from Walter M. Kollmorgen and David S. Simonett. "Grazing Operations in the Flint Hills-Bluestem Pastures of Chase County, Kansas," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, LV (1965), 263-267. In his article Malin notes that "'bluestem'" began to be promoted by cattlemen as a name for the ranching region in the 1920s, and that, by the time of his writing, it was a more popular phrase than the Flint Hills term. "Bluestem" was noted on but one of my questionnaires, however, and was used only ten times as a business name.

25. The Pierre Shale story is in John Rydjord, *Kansas Place-Names* (Norman, 1972), 23; the haze quotation is from Erasmus Haworth, "Physiography of Western Kansas," *Kansas University Geological Survey*, II (1897), 47.

26. Adams, 120. See also Nevin M. Fenneman, *Physiography of Western United States* (New York, 1931) 6, 28-30; and Schoewe, 276, 302-307.

27. The unmodified word "plains" was mentioned twenty-two times on the completed questionnaires, Golden Plains three times, and Tri-Plains one time.

28. Several possibilities exist to explain the infrequent occurrence of Great Plains on the questionnaire. Taking into account the evidence of the term's infrequent usage as part of a business name, I think that the interpretation of Great Plains as an academic rather than a vernacular term, discussed previously, is valid. A second possibility is that the wording of the local regions question implied places of such small scope to the respondents that Great Plains was not considered a proper response. A third alternative involves a hesitancy to list the term on this question because a specific Great Plains question existed elsewhere on the questionnaire. Obviously, the alternatives are not mutually exclusive.

29. Ralph H. Brown, *Historical Geography of the United States* (New York, 1948), 373-374.

30. Wheat, 146.

31. *Twenty-first Annual Report*, U.S. Geological Survey (1901), Part 4, 601-741.

32. Adams, 110-113; Schoewe, 275-276, 311-330; Thornbury, 300-321.

33. The originator of the term was an Associated Press reporter, Robert Geiger, according to Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque, 1979), 2. Bonnifield defines the Kansas portion of the Dust Bowl "heartland" as the four southwesternmost counties plus Hamilton County (3). This conforms closely to the vernacular regionalization.

34. These assertions are supported by James C. Malin's, "Dust Storms, 1850-1900," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XIV (1946), 129-144, 265-296, 391-413.

35. Rydjord, 105.

36. William E. Powell, "European Settlement in the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XLI (1975) 163-164.

37. Kenneth L. Simons, "And So We Became 'the Balkans of Kansas'", *Pittsburg Headlight-Sun*. Sept. 17, 1970.

38. Powell, 150-165; and Professor Robert Hilt, Pittsburg State University, personal communication, April 6, 1979.

39. The origin of the Golden Belt phrase has been traced by James C. Malin, *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas: A Study in Adaption to Subhumid Geographical Environment* (Lawrence, 1944), 52, 66-72. A newspaper correspondent coined it in 1877 and

subsequently it became widely used in land advertisements and as a slogan by the Kansas Pacific Railroad.

40. The discrepancy would be even greater if Dust Bowl and Balkans were included in the negative list.

41. Gould and White, 93-118; Jordan, 298-303. See also Wynona H. Wilkins, "The Idea of North Dakota," *North Dakota Quarterly*, XXXIX, No. 1 (Winter 1971), 5-28.

42. "How it is Playing in Emporia," *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 20, 1974, 36. A sampling of articles with similar statements includes: Meridel LeSueur, "Corn Village," *Scribner's Magazine*, XC (1931), 133-140; Maureen McKernan, "In Defense of Kansas", *Scribner's Magazine*, XCII (1932), 106-108; Frederick Simpich, "Speaking of Kansas", *The National Geographic Magazine*, LXXII, No. 2 (August 1937), 135-182; Nelson A. Crawford, "The State of Kansas", *American Mercury* LXX(1950), 465-472; Debs Myers, "The Exciting Story of Kansas", *Holiday*, 1X (June 1951), 52-55ff.; Davis, "What's the Matter", and John Bird, "Kansas, My Kansas", *Saturday Evening Post*, CCXXXIV (April 29, 1961), 20-21ff.

43. James R. Shortridge, *Kaw Valley Landscapes: A Guide to Eastern Kansas* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1977), 12-33, 199-208.

44. James R. Shortridge, "Patterns of Religion in the United States," *Geographical Review*, LXVI(1976), 420-434; Jordan, 303-304.

45. Albert B. Cook III, "Perspectives for a Linguistic Atlas of Kansas", *American Speech*, LIII (1978), 199-209; Shortridge, "Patterns of Religion," 432.

46. Cook, 200-201; Daniel Elazar, *American Federalism: A View From the States*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1972), 106-107; Edwin S. Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1976), map in pocket.