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## West of Time

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Article Summary: Roberts sees two Nebraskas. Where the time zone changes, the traveler leaves the Midwest for the West.

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*By Phil Roberts*

Dr. Kent Blaser's essay, "Where is Nebraska, anyway?" raises some interesting questions about place, not only for Nebraskans, but for residents of other "interior states" created not by geography but through artificially drawn political borders. (Indeed, the problem stretches beyond the middle of America—for instance, how many Oregonians or Washingtonians believe the eastern portions of their respective states should be classified as "Pacific Coast"?) Dr. Blaser points out the numerous methods proposed by geographers and historians in determining region. One should not be surprised at the idiosyncratic biases contained in each formulation.

I first read Dr. Blaser's essay two weeks before filing my candidacy for governor of Wyoming. I set it aside, re-reading it only after the primary election brought the campaign to an end in mid-August. In between the two readings, I traveled throughout Wyoming, talking to people in every town about politics, economics, culture—indeed, even their history. From that experience, and transplanting the results to Nebraska, I would concur that self-identification remains a central factor in determining a state's placement in a region. Basically, if residents of a state believe themselves to be "Midwesterners," then they must be. Some of what I discovered about regional identification seems self-evident. But there are other more subtle ways of detecting "self-identification" beyond simply asking.

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Nebraska's population is more "home-grown" than Wyoming's. Nonetheless, I have found that people identify a state's locale based on where they came from previously. Thus, Wyoming is clearly "West" to those who came from Illinois—or even Nebraska. Yet, with the increasing incidence of California transplants to Wyoming, the identification was "the Rockies" or, in a couple of cases, "the Great Plains." Contrary to the statement in the essay, I spoke with no one who considered Wyoming to be "Midwest" (except, perhaps, for those couple of hundred souls living in the town by that name—a town established by an oil company formed by Oklahoma interests early in this century and named Midwest Oil Company).

While not entirely to Dr. Blaser's point, this finding caused me to think about another identification scheme. One may be able to measure such identification from the mobility of the young—the places outside the state where young people are attracted, either to attend college or to get employment. Might they be more attracted to the region with which they might personally identify? In Wyoming, for the young people who do leave the state, their destinations usually are "west"—Denver, Salt Lake City, perhaps cities on the West Coast. Rarely will a Wyoming young person look to Chicago, Kansas City, or Minneapolis for schooling or employment.

While my "evidence" is merely anecdotal, my suspicion is that Nebraska divides quite evenly in this respect— young people from, say, North Platte to the west are attracted toward opportuni-

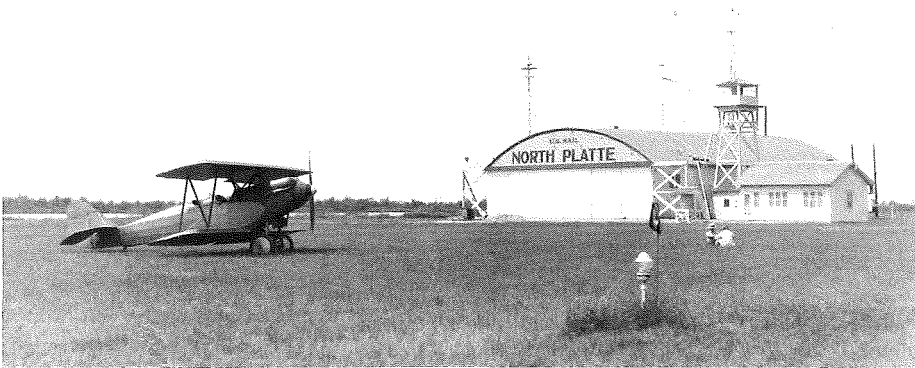
ties in Denver, while counterparts east of there look to the midwestern cities for such opportunities. Thus, on this basis, I would argue that Dr. Blaser is only half correct—Nebraska indeed is half "West" and half "Midwest."

Perhaps as recently as ten years ago, one might have argued that mass media presence could have been used to determine regional identification. The "footprint" of television signals broadcast both within the state's borders and from without might have helped determine "identification" with one region or another. With the advent of cable and satellite television, such factors no longer have meaning. (That would make most of America as "New South" as Atlanta.) Newspaper circulation, in this time of national newspapers, makes for similar confusion in the field of print media.

The same might be said for today's sports team identification. In the days when local radio joined "networks" for broadcast of games by a specific team, this might have helped arrive at an answer of regional identification. These days, TV and radio networks lack the attachments to specific professional franchises (to say nothing of team members, coaches—even owners). Besides, as a measure of "region," where might the "borderline" be between Chicago Cubs, Minnesota Twins, and Kansas City Royals fans as distinguished from those following the relatively new Colorado Rockies? For football, the Bears, Vikings, Chiefs, and Broncos can be substituted in the relevant slots.

Today, Big Red football is beamed statewide. The Cornhuskers play in the

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With the advent of national airmail service in the early 1920s, the airport at North Platte formed an important link on the New York to San Francisco transcontinental route, serving as a stopover between Cheyenne and Omaha. Condra Collection-4020



As seen from the town of Scottsbluff in July 1925, Scotts Bluff rises to signal Nebraska's nearby western border. Scotts Bluff's status as monument was confirmed in 1919 when President Woodrow Wilson designated it as Nebraska's first national monument. Condra Collection-6928

Big Twelve, a conference with members from the "Midwest," although one key traditional rivalry always has been with the University of Colorado, clearly from the "West."

After examining all of Dr. Blaser's factors and considering a few more, I see two Nebraskas—one is Midwest and the other is West. Ultimately, the determination of region might come down to the same reason that some historians assume Walter Prescott Webb made the

dividing line for "the West" at the 98th meridian instead of the more traditional 100th meridian—he lived in Austin, Texas (east of the 100th meridian), but he wanted to be "in the West." For me, there is a point where Nebraska changes from "Midwest" to "West." It might have to do with agriculture, rainfall, or temperature and humidity. Perhaps it is where distances between populated places expand. It may be where, as Dr. Blaser suggests, cowboys

become farmers. But those are not the only factors.

I sense a dividing line between Midwest and West where the time zone changes—where the motorist is reminded to change the clock from "Mountain Standard Time" to "Central Standard" or vice versa. It is a line as artificial as a state border or "line of aridity." Nonetheless, operating under the same time as the "central" United States suggests a form of union transcending geography. Western Nebraska shares the clock time with Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona (except during daylight savings time), and other western states. Clocks in the eastern part of the state, however, show the same time as Chicago, Minneapolis, Kansas City, St. Louis—midwestern cities by nearly everyone's definition. Combined with all of the other factors distinguishing "Midwest" from "West," time divides Nebraska between regions. Taken by itself, the divide can be criticized for what it omits and what it includes. (Is North Platte less "West" than Ogallala? Is Valentine a "Midwest" town, albeit by twenty-two highway miles?) Yet, it is another way to explain human needs for categorization—who we are and where we fit into the broader cosmos.