NEBRASKA
MIDLANDS AND DIVERSITY

By Fred Thomas

Like so many college professors and editorial writers, Kent Blaser is too scholarly in his essay "Where Is Nebraska, Anyway?" He gives us too many possibilities to ponder. In a world seemingly content with sound-bite answers, Blaser asks for extended thought. It is easier to answer what Nebraska is than where, but let's look at where first.

Nebraska is 1,539 miles west of Hyannisport; 1,026 miles north of the French Quarter; 1,559 miles east of Disneyland; and 434 miles south of Fargo. But those facts don't tell us much more than discoursing on whether Nebraska is in the West, Midwest, Great Plains, or North Central states.

None of the labels fits Nebraska precisely. Forget calling Nebraska the Corn Belt. Belts are too constricting. Heartland is too corny; it was likely coined by a TV anchorperson from Baltimore. Calling Nebraska the Breadbasket is okay, but only if you include fry bread from the Omaha Indian Tribe's powwow.

I have a label Blaser did not mention—Midlands. To me, Midlands implies Midwest and beyond. Midlands has that transitional feeling of gliding from Midwest to Great Plains, which is what Nebraska does. The *Omaha World-Herald* called its Sunday magazine *The Magazine of the Midlands*, then killed it several years ago and substituted *Parade* magazine. *Parade* is not Nebraska in content or title, but must make more money.

Fred Thomas, a retired Omaha World-Herald *reporter and environmental writer, died January 29, 1999, soon after completing work on this essay.*



Healthy vineyards near Union, Cass County, Nebraska, June 16, 1931.
Condra Collection-2588

So how else can someone define where Nebraska is? Well, Nebraska is where:

—People are united on only two topics, Cornhusker football and talk about the weather.

—Visionaries created the Unicameral Legislature, public power, and a world-class state capitol building decades ago, but succeeding generations turned their vision inward and conservative. One step toward rekindling visionaryness would be to change the design of the Kearney arch over Interstate 80 from buffoonery to subtle beauty.

—Residents underappreciate the state's marvelous natural resources, from Sowbelly Canyon to Indian Cave, the Wildcat Hills to Blackbird Bend.

—Community leaders quest for more manufacturing jobs to make Nebraska more like Chicago and Detroit, but undervalue the economic potential of a slumbering clean industry—tourism.

—The East peters out (thank goodness), and the West begins.

—East vs. west conflict is ingrained in behavior, with the scrap over the site of a new state prison only the latest manifestation.

—Leaders realized Nebraska could be spelled backward and turned into a civic organization sponsoring horse racing, ice hockey, and other entertainment. Can you imagine residents of surrounding states flocking to their Ak-Sar-Ben lookalike under the banner of Awoi, Sasnak, Gnimoyw, Odaroloc, Htuos Atokad, or Iruossim?



Land is not just a place for work, but also a place for recreation. Here a fisherman angles for trout in the beautiful canyon of Long Pine Creek on the border between Brown and Rock counties, about 1919.
Condra Collection-3685

Blaser perceptively says the American fault line runs along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, not along the 98th or 100th meridian. Julesburg, Brush, and other towns are more Nebraska than Colorado. Having them pay taxes to Lincoln would lessen the periodic desire of some western Nebraskans to secede to Colorado or Wyoming.

As a longtime newspaperman, I focus on facts. In this context, Nebraska is:

—The nation's sixteenth largest state in area, thirty-seventh in population, and thirty-seventh admitted to the Union.

—The home of Arbor Day, Boys Town, the College World Series, and the world's best-known tractor testing laboratory.

—Home of the largest area of sand dunes in the Western Hemisphere, but, of course, they are covered with grass and cattle.

—The world's largest producer and user of center pivot irrigation.

—The location of the world's largest man-planted forest.

—One of the top ten birding sites in the world (the Big Bend reach of the Platte River, with its concentration of cranes and their cousins).

—Site of the first claim under the Homestead Act.

—Home of Kool-Aid, raisin bran, Vise Grip pliers, and (this is debatable) the Reuben sandwich.

These facts, and more, are found in the *Nebraska Blue Book*. But facts alone are cold, and don't create an image of where Nebraska is. I like the slogan "Nebraska the Good Life." But it also could apply to other states. I bet Iowans are burning that Nebraska beat them to the Good Life, leaving Iowans with that slogan about "You make me smile." If you want a more precise slogan for Nebraska, how about "Nebraska: Land of Diversity" or "Nebraska: Quilt of Diversity"? Nebraska's uniqueness is diversity. Blue-collar industry along the east coast, farming next door, then ranching.

Where else does the nation's second richest man live a few blocks from a college professor? Nebraska is where the birthplaces of Malcolm X and Gerald Ford are perhaps four miles apart. Where they still harvest hay a few blocks from suburban mini-mansions. Where some of the Old West's mythical characters roamed, from "Buffalo Bill" Cody to "Wild Bill" Hickok and Crazy Horse.

Perhaps Nebraska's identity could be captured under a title related to the clouds and open spaces that amaze newcomers from the East. Like "Thunderhead Citadel," "Cumulus Capital of the Continent," or "Bigger Sky Country."

Perhaps we can determine where Nebraska is by listening to travel writers. The *World-Herald*'s Tom Allan, who has traveled the state more extensively than anyone (at least since the printing press was invented), wrote in the 1979 edition of *Nebraska, A Guide to the Cornhusker State*, that Nebraska "was a museum without walls, 77,000 square miles alive with frontier history and rich in scenic beauty, from the bluffs and rolling, forested hills of the east to the 'sea of grass' ranges of the Sandhills." Mari Sandoz wrote that Nebraska "usually is characterized as that long, flat state that runs between me and any place I want to be." Sherry Polcyn wrote in the 1998 *Old West Trail Explorer Magazine* that "Nebraska is a 77,000 square mile museum without walls. It's the biggest museum you'll ever enter, and the most impressive." Sherry, meet Tom. Maybe writers don't add much in a quest for defining where Nebraska is.

"Nebraska the Beef State?" Nah, sounds like a slogan fashioned by today's tax protestors. "Cornhuskers" is outdated, except on the football field. (Personally, I prefer "Bug Eaters," the University of Nebraska team's name around the turn of the century.) Perhaps it isn't possible to define where Nebraska is in a few words. Perhaps Nebraska is an amorphous Casper-the-Ghost-like figure—in a red and white football jersey (I mean scarlet and cream, chancellor)—who slips on chaps, bib overalls, and white-shirt-and-tie as he drifts from west to east.

But, pressed, I'd say Nebraska is in the Heartland of the Midlands, teetering between West and Midwest, one of the north-central states of the upper Midwest, forming part of the Great Plains. If you visualize the Great Plains as the silhouette of a cowboy with his feet near Amarillo, Texas, Nebraska is the shoulders, ribs, and belly. But that depiction places the brains of the Great Plains in the Dakotas. Well, uh . . .

Where is Nebraska, anyway? Where Mother and Father Nature placed it. Far from the centers of power and population. Can we ask for more than that?