

A M E R I C A ' S 1 0 0 T H M E R I D I A N



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*A Plains Journey*

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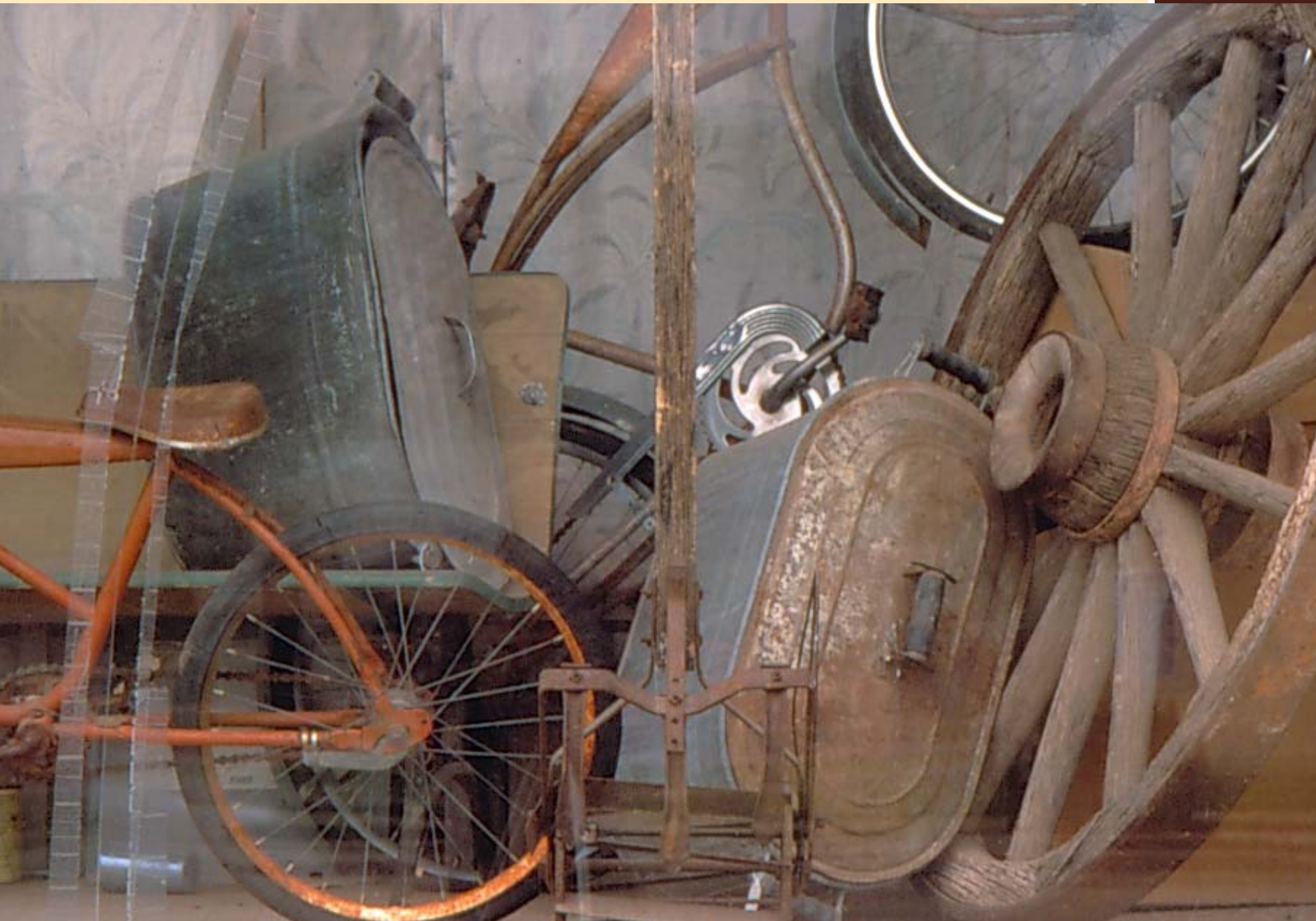
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Bronte, Coke County, Texas



211 CENTER STREET  
Holbrook, Furnas County, Nebraska

## American Heartline

*William Kittredge*

*They hand in hand with wandering  
steps and slow,  
Through Eden took thir solitarie way.*

■ FINAL LINES OF *Paradise Lost*,  
JOHN MILTON

**I**t was in the deep expanse of the heartland, according to the thought of generations, that the secret lived. Had to be, or there wasn't any secret.

Our national mirror, the various media, is these days focused almost exclusively on bi-coastal matters. Country life, if it is thought of at all, is mostly regarded as irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Rural people are understood to inhabit an archaic agricultural dreamland. But country life as it has come to exist across the once-upon-a-time grasslands along the 100th meridian is another looking glass, in which we can witness dreams of American homelands as presently enacted.

In June of 1998 I drove the 100th meridian, which runs pretty much down the exact center of the United States, for more than fifteen hundred miles, from Canada to the Rio Grande. I was like an anthropologist, dedicated to spying. I was interested in seeing how the descendants of people who made a stand on what was taken to be an empty stage had used their histories to turn vast territories familiar, into a homeland; I was interested in seeing if their life story of generations, and of place, had become for them interchangeable. And, most centrally, I was interested in seeing if there was any sort of necessary relationship between life in conjunction to vast spaces and societal generosity, if the one kind of openness fed into the other.

My main purpose lay in giving myself a chance to encounter an American culture in which generosity was understood as essential and ordinary. What I imagined was a sweet and open-handed heartland in the

center of America. Which turned out, in sadly circumscribed ways, to be quite actual.

Mine was an agenda that began forming decades ago, in the summer of 1968, as I crossed the plains on the run, far from the sagebrush deserts of southeastern Oregon I knew as home. Our ranch was sold, my wife left for California with our children, and I was off to begin a new life among strangers.

Tossing empty beer cans over into the back seat, I wondered if Jack Kerouac and those boys really loved the road. Ray Charles moaned “I Can’t Stop Loving You.” I was desperate. Give it, I thought, some time. Time heals. Maybe. The vivid sky looked merciless.

A year later, going to a teaching job in Montana, towing a U-Haul and weary from a going away party in Iowa City, I crossed the Missouri in South Dakota and everything changed. Just beyond the bridge I stopped for gas, walked off from my car, and stood with my shadow for company, trying to allow myself to acknowledge that maybe I wasn’t always going to be so distant from myself as I’d been during my year in the Midwest. Maybe it was the shattering Western light. I was back in the West, where I thought I knew the rules, where the story about who I was supposed to be made sense, back inside my skin. I vowed that I would never voluntarily find myself back in the Plains again.

My next sight of the Dakotas came on a winter morning, looking into a blizzard from an airliner grounded in Bismarck, watching workmen in hooded goose down coats go stoically about the methodical business of loading luggage and refueling. God,

I thought, what drives people to stay in such a place?

Then in the summer of 1982, driving through on my way east, North Dakota turned out to be green and blossoming. The rolling hills and white houses amid green gardens, wetlands mixed with fields of nodding sunflowers, looked to be a vision of the good place on earth, populated by people devoted to taking care. Maybe there, in that heartland, it would be possible to find communities where generosity was the ruling cultural paradigm.

It’s my idea that we can’t proceed much farther as a world society without rethinking our stories and thus our sense of what is valuable, and that we are presently courting oblivion as we go on destroying gene pools and indigenous cultures. It’s my idea that we must turn from a culture mostly driven by an urge to accumulate, to use up if necessary, and invent a society eager to give, to nourish, to take care. It was my thought that I might find enclaves of such a society in the Great Plains.

### **The World All Before Them**

About fifty million years ago, in what is called the Laramide Revolution, mountain chains rose along the western edge of North America. Storms gathered over the Pacific, cooled, and emptied of moisture three times before they reached the interior plains east of the Rockies. In that rain shadow, twenty-five million years ago, a vast, windy north-south run of grasslands came to exist. A wonderland of creatures evolved.

Twelve thousand years ago, around the end of the last Ice Age, the Clovis people

appeared, with tools, elegant spear points, and stone hammers. They may have hunted great mammals like the mammoth to extinction. Between eight and nine thousand years ago they were replaced by the Folsom people, who fashioned smaller spear points and hunted the prehistoric bison.

From 4000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. the Plains went through a drought that turned them into a desert. After the rains began again, and the grasses came back, humans resettled in the fertile river valleys, hunting and gathering and grinding seeds, learning to stay put and tend their gardens. This way of living evolved and continued for four thousand years.

Then came the first echoes from Europe, catastrophic diseases, like smallpox and measles, brought by white men. Spanish horses and the white men themselves showed up, beginning with the French traders of the 1740s, followed by Lewis and Clark in 1804. By the middle of the nineteenth century the vast plains had been crossed and recrossed by explorers, and by artists such as George Catlin and Karl Bodmer and John James Audubon, and by gold seekers and farmers, buffalo hunters and the U.S. Army. The great displaced tribes like the Sioux, who for a brief moment were lords on the northern Plains; and the Comanche, the finest horsemen, were horseback warriors who for more than a century amassed an empire from Kansas to Mexico, keeping the settlement of the southern Plains at bay.

This story can be understood as both a bloody hymn to warfare, and a saga about settlement and agricultural people who



N O R T H D A K O T A

FENCE

Highway 1804, Emmons County, North Dakota

VIEW FROM  
THE TOP  
Fessenden, Wells  
County, North  
Dakota



FIRST LIGHT  
Fessenden, Wells  
County, North  
Dakota



barns, churches, and schools were built; cemeteries were laid out. Generations of people who had suffered to survive were buried. Steel-wheeled steam tractors replaced the work teams. Trees were planted in shelterbelts as protection both from winter winds and psychic isolation. People who longed for community created enclaves where birds and even rodents could nest. Another barrier against infinities.

Some 250,000 settlers came in the years between 1900 and 1915. But, by 1915, during tough economic times, the great tide

of settlement turned on the northern Plains, and flowed out, feeding a history of uprooting. Only the toughest remained.

In those difficult years citizens in North Dakota formed a political organization called the Nonpartisan League, and demanded that farmers, not buyers, shippers, and distributors, reap the primary rewards from farming. In 1919 the Nonpartisan League took control of state government in North Dakota, enacting a program of state socialism to control the power of marketing corporations. It was an act of

enormous communal will. But, during the 1920s, the value of North Dakota farm property fell by more than a half billion dollars. Five hundred banks failed. Then came drought. Half the population of North Dakota was on relief in 1936. Citizens all up and down the Plains were gripped by anti-war, isolationist sentiments. People in the Dakotas fought to control their lives but couldn't. Their fates, consistently, were determined by outside forces.

But tides eventually turned. Drought ended; World War II brought good grain



WEATHERED  
WALL  
Esmond, Benson  
County, North  
Dakota



COMPOSITION IN ORANGE  
AND BLUE  
Esmond, Benson County, North Dakota

River that reaches from Pierre upstream past Bismarck and the site of old Fort Mandan. The Oahe Dam, built between 1948 and 1964, is the largest rolled earth dam in the world, 242 feet high, one of more than a hundred dams the Bureau of Reclamation built to generate cheap electricity, to store water for irrigation, and to control flooding on the Missouri while inundating some 600,000 acres of riverside agricultural land. Oahe Dam put one hundred and fifty thousand acres of farm lands in the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River

Indian Reservations under water in the 1960s: a third of the reservation families were relocated; their abilities to sustain themselves were devastated; archeological and historic sites were drowned. We expend our treasures in profligate ways.

People come to Mobridge from hundreds of miles out on the prairies. Fishing, during the couple of decades after the dam was finished, was spectacular for walleye and smallmouth bass. Salmon were introduced in the 1980s. But lately, even from big boats, the catch is not what it used to be.

A cluster of good old boys were drinking and telling jokes at the rail in the lounge attached to the finest motel in town. I was happy to join them. But Mobridge is a declining tourist town, and gin and joviality are unconvincing cures for a pervasive sense that life's adventures have irrevocably run thin. The reservoir is silting full. In the bar we were fighting off the dreaded retreat to our motel rooms, television, and the silence of the digital clock.

■  
The Missouri is an edge between ecologies.