

Cities on the Plains: the Evolution of Urban Kansas

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Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas, by James R. Shortridge. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xiv, 480 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, charts, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Douglas Firth Anderson is professor of history at Northwestern College (Iowa). He has an unpublished book manuscript titled *Religious Borderlands of the Urban West: Protestant Anglophone Culture and Institutions in Metropolitan San Francisco, 1900–1920*.

Cities are not what most people would associate with either Kansas or Iowa. Yet both states have urban pasts. Geographer James R. Shortridge's new book is a major accomplishment in constructing an urban historiography for Kansas. *Cities on the Plains* is also very suggestive for thinking comprehensively about Iowa's urban past.

Shortridge is clear about his goal: to examine historically the "urban system" (xiii) in Kansas. In other words, his focus is on Kansas's history of urban development, considered largely from the standpoint of networks of trade, manufacturing, transportation, natural resource extraction, and other social systems. Why did the "urban dreams" in some towns "falter while others came to fruition? How did the current hierarchy of cities emerge in the state?" (2).

In pursuit of his goal, the author is magisterial in breadth and thoroughness. Maps (26 total), photographs (49), charts (5), and tables (2) reinforce Shortridge's detailed synthesis and analysis. An introductory chapter lays out two geographical models of urban development (central-place and mercantile) and outlines the book, which examines the 118 cities in Kansas that have had a population of "at least twenty-five hundred residents at some point in their histories" (9).

The remaining chapters proceed chronologically. Two chapters detail the river-landing and wagon-road rivalries that led to the urban hierarchy of Leavenworth, Atchison, Topeka, and Lawrence in the 1850s and 1860s. Three chapters analyze how competing railroad systems fostered urbanization. Between the mid-1860s and the 1950s, railroads were intertwined with the growth of Kansas City—on both sides of the Kansas-Missouri border—into the central plains' metropolis. They also played major, and often decisive, roles in the creation, flourishing, or stagnation of various urban communities (such as Topeka, Ft. Scott, Salina, Wichita, and Dodge City).

Railroads were not the only determinant for urban growth, decline, and interconnections. One entire chapter and portions of others point out the importance of coal, lead, zinc, salt, natural gas, oil, and water resources for the flourishing of (for greater or lesser periods of time) cities such as Baxter Springs, Pittsburg, Hutchinson, El Dorado, Garden City, and Liberal. Further, public institutions—such as military bases,

colleges and universities, prisons, and hospitals—could provide economic and cultural viability to towns and cities such as Lawrence, Emporia, Manhattan, Leavenworth, Junction City, Hays, and Osawatomie.

Beginning in the 1950s, the most important new factors in the dynamics of the Kansas urban system were gasoline-powered vehicles, state turnpikes, and interstate highways. Shortridge recognizes that interstates are no more totalistic in their effects than railroads. Nonetheless, in two chapters Shortridge details how interstates have largely reinforced the dominance of metropolitan Kansas City through the boom of "edge cities" such as Lenexa, Olathe, Gardner, and Overland Park and the subsidiary functions of cities such as Wichita, Salina, and Hays.

Shortridge has performed a massive work of synthesis and analysis. The book's concepts, connections, and historical material are clearly presented, easily accessible, and potentially provocative for further work. It will be a touchstone book for scholars not only of urban and Kansas history, but also western, midwestern, and Iowa history.

Even the book's limits are at least as provocative as they are disappointing. There is an impersonal feel to the book. Despite caveats, systems seem to have merely formal connection with human agency in the author's account. No doubt this is primarily due to Shortridge's adherence to the book's stated goal and to disciplinary perspective and publication constraints. Still, works by scholars Witold Rybczynski, Thomas Morain, Richard Francaviglia, Royden Loewen, and William Cronon, to name but a few, suggest other realms to consider in constructing an urban history for Kansas (or Iowa). What differentiates a village from a town from a city from a metropolis (Rybczynski)? How have Kansas's urban communities come into being, changed, in some cases declined, not only as economic and political entities, but also as human communities and cultural landscapes (Morain and Francaviglia)? How have race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and rural life interplayed in urban life in the Great Plains and Prairies (Morain and Loewen)? What have been the implications of urbanization for the natural as well as the cultural and social landscape of Kansas, and what are the larger social structures and ideologies that shape the development of Great Plains and Prairie urbanization (Cronon)? What has Great Plains and Prairie urbanization meant for the cultural ideals of agrarianism and small-town "Main Streets" (Rybczynski, Morain, and Francaviglia)? Shortridge says little to nothing that would substantively address these and other such questions. Yet what he has done is more than enough to position his readers to consider all that remains to be understood about grassland cities, whether in Kansas or Iowa.

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